YANG SU
There's Something Wrong with the Chief
DU ZHU YOU BING
2

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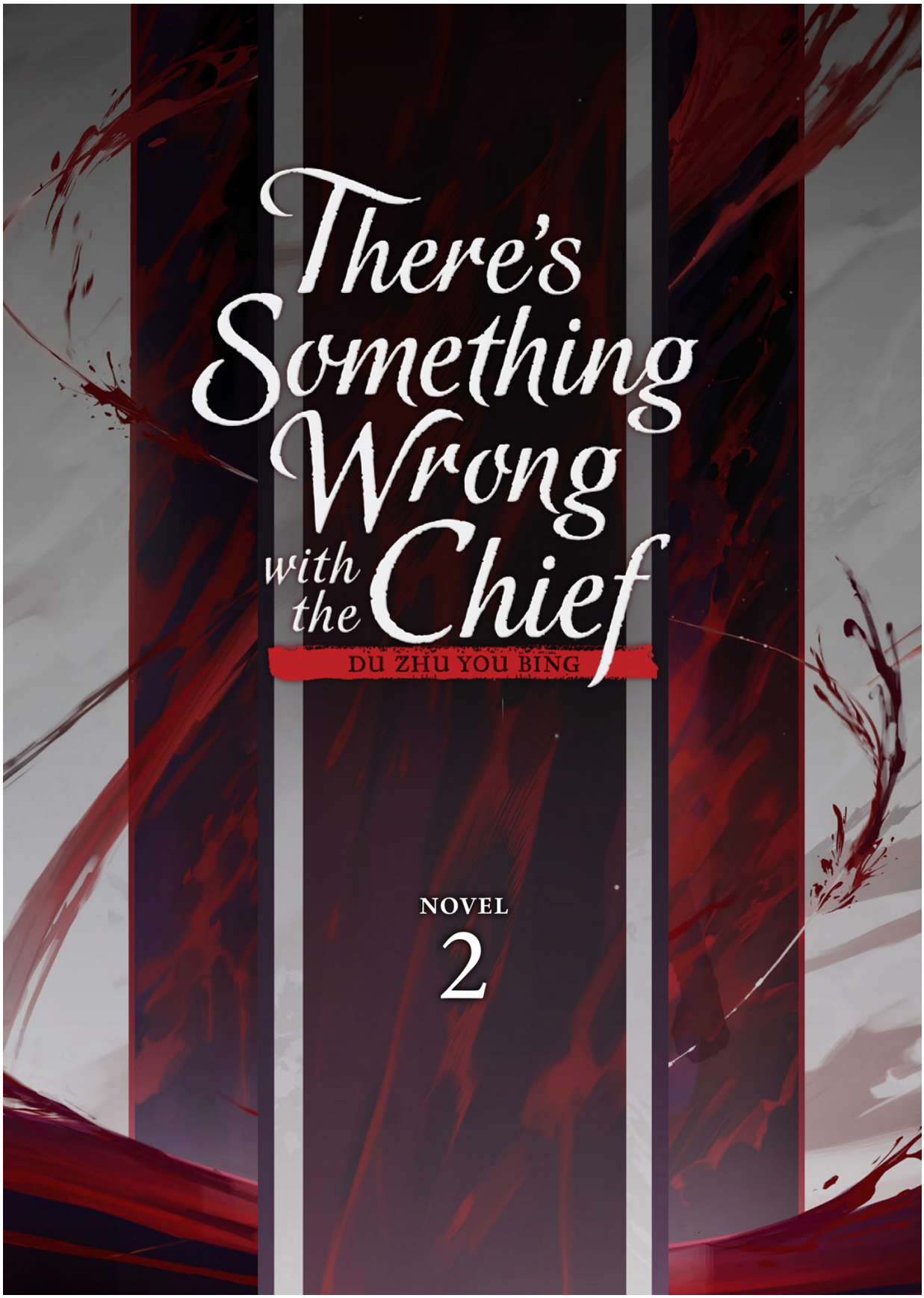
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NOVEL
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NOVEL

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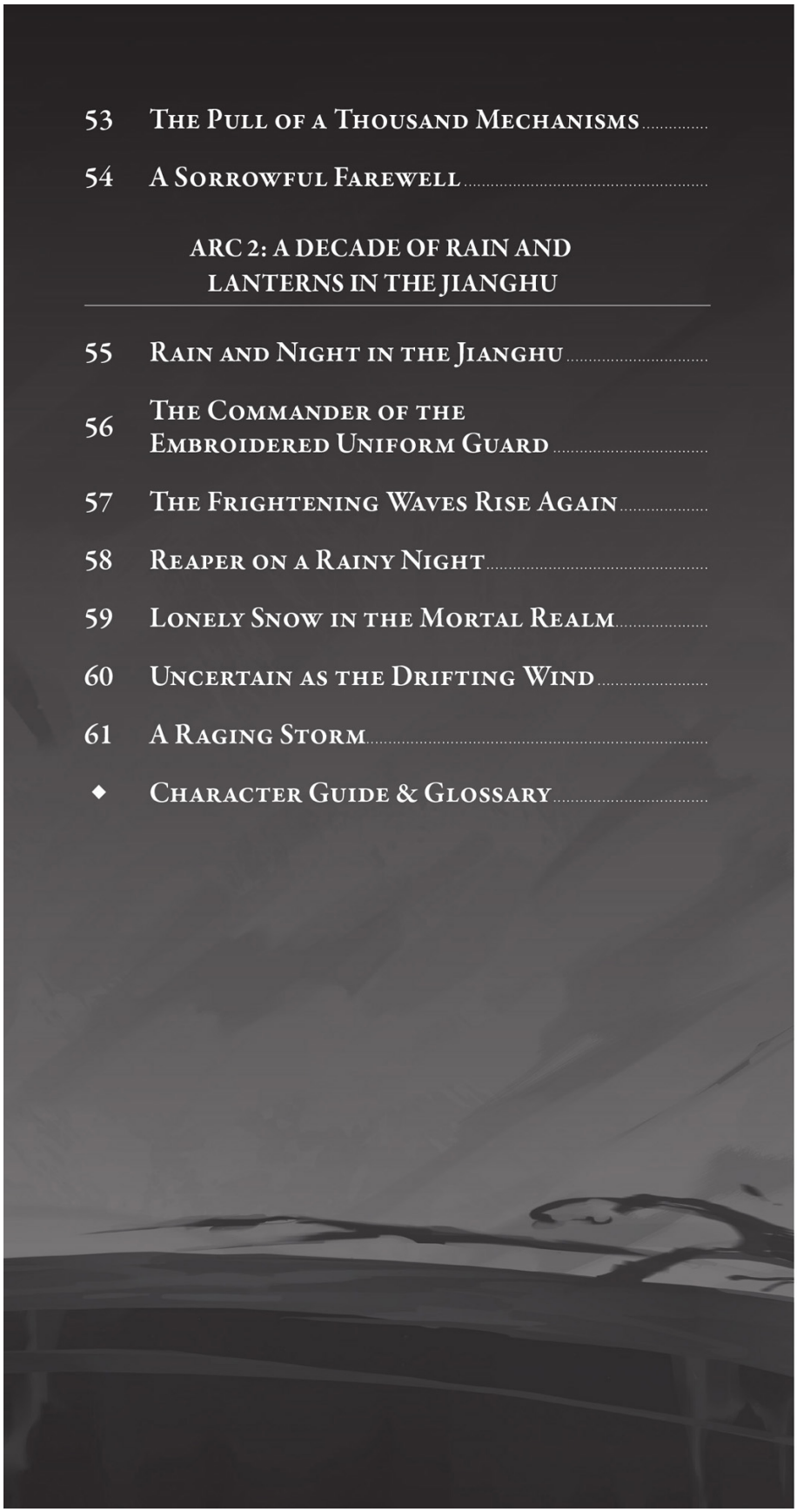

Chapter 32:
The Qianji Saber

THE DENSE FOREST swayed softly in the breeze, foliage rippling like waves that stretched to the horizon. The woodland here was ancient, the tree trunks as wide as barrels—it would have taken two or three men to ring one completely with their arms. The tightly woven branches and leaves admitted only an occasional sliver of filtered sunlight.

Xiahou Lian darted effortlessly through the brush, so nimble he'd have put even a monkey to shame. He knew exactly which bough to land on, which outstretched limb to grab. He could have been blindfolded and still made his way without a single slip.

Soon, he reached a vast graveyard full of countless tombstones and shattered swords. The markers crowded the forest. Some rested against massive trees, cloaked in bird droppings and fallen leaves; others had cracked in half amid the rotten fruit scattered nearby. Even the markers that were intact lay neglected and forgotten.

This was the Blade Cemetery, the resting place for generations of those Garden assassins whose bodies could be recovered. Their tombstones detailed both the number and names of their victims and the identity of their killers. Beside the graves stood the sabers that served them in life, now weathering the elements alongside their masters in death. Most had rusted beyond recognition and were liable to snap at the lightest touch.

As a child, Xiahou Lian had been terrified of visiting this place. Everyone buried here had been a horrifying demon, a notorious villain whose saber once dripped with blood. He imagined the area swarming with

the wrathful ghosts of the interred or the vengeful spirits of their victims. In short, it was a place to avoid.

Later, though, he realized it was nothing more than a neglected graveyard. Most Garden assassins had no family—no parents, no children—and thus no one to visit or tend their grave. The entire cemetery had always been left unmaintained, which somehow made it even more desolate than a nameless grave by the roadside.

Xiahou Lian leapt down from a tree and prostrated himself three times outside the Blade Cemetery.

“Uncles and brothers, heroes and seniors, I am Xiahou Lian, a disciple under the twelfth-generation abbot, Shixin Buddha. I’m setting out on a mission to Huizhou to assassinate an important target, but I lack a proper weapon. Thus, my only choice is to come here to borrow a blade. As the saying goes, ‘All who meet in the jianghu are brothers,’ and we’re all members of the Garden. I hope you can forgive me. I promise to care for the blade diligently: I’ll clean it each morning and offer it sacrifices of poultry, fish, and meat every night. Sorry, sorry!”

After offering his respects, Xiahou Lian rose and walked the perimeter of the graveyard. He avoided the graves near the center; the sabers there were too old. It’d be disastrous if his blade snapped in the heat of battle.

At the very edge of the graveyard, he came across a fresh marker. Beside it was a saber with an ebony hilt, its straight blade single-grooved and shimmering faintly. The grave belonged to Tang Lan, who had perished the previous January—not during an assassination, but when enemies had surrounded and slain him. Xiahou Lian had encountered Tang Lan a few

times during New Year celebrations; he recalled the man as stern and serious. Certain rumors claimed he was a defector from the Tang Clan who'd entered the Garden after the abbot rescued him.

Xiahou Lian took an instant liking to the blade. He bowed his head before the grave three times and said, "Tang Lan-qianbei, I humbly ask to borrow your blade. I swear to return to sweep your grave and offer sacrifices. Here—I've brought you paper money as well, so don't deprive yourself in the afterlife—pay for some maids or servants. If there's anything you crave, send me a dream, and I'll burn it for you."

After burning the paper money, Xiahou Lian wiped his hands on his clothes, stood, then grabbed the saber's hilt and pulled. The ancient blade was heavy, and it had been stabbed deep into the earth. Carefully tugging it free, Xiahou Lian accidentally triggered a mechanism within the hilt. A needle as fine as an ox hair shot out, grazing his nose before embedding itself in a nearby branch.

Startled, Xiahou Lian let go of the sword and tumbled to the ground in front of Tang Lan's grave. Then he noticed the two characters of *Qianji* engraved on the blade.

"Qianbei, you may not want to lend me your saber, but there's no need to try to kill me. And I won't back down anyway—I'm taking it whether you like it or not!"

Xiahou Lian sprang to his feet, rubbed his hands together eagerly, then grabbed the hilt and twisted it until he'd discharged every hidden needle. Then he yanked the saber free. He slipped it into the leather bag he'd brought, slung the bag over his shoulder, and started back the way he'd come.

The mountain loomed vast and majestic, its summit grazing the sky. At its base sat Qiye Garden's village, where farmers toiled and children practiced with sabers. Assassins descending the mountain occasionally stopped there for supplies. A winding path led to the Garden's temple, nestled halfway up the mountain. The assassins' huts were scattered around the temple, and at night, their lamps dotted the mountainside like stars in the dark sky—beneath every pinprick of light was a saber-wielding killer. Yet most of the time, the mountainside was deserted, the abbot and Xiahou Lian its only inhabitants. The temple itself stood unlit and silent. Xiahou Lian would roam the empty mountain like a lone crow until he found a spot with a clear view of the night sky. There, he'd gaze at the star-filled heavens until fatigue overtook him, falling asleep beneath the sky till he was woken by the morning sun.

The temple sat quietly in the twilight, its dark, weathered tiles glinting with a faint golden glow. It was the middle of the year, when most of the assassins were out on missions. A few might have already fallen in some remote, unseen place. Among the ancient trees, the temple stood in isolation, like a doddering old man unable to speak. Half the building had collapsed, exposing crudely hewn ebony beams; it was even possible to make out the faint scorch marks of long-ago flames.

Xiahou Lian had been the culprit behind that fire. As a child, he'd been playing with firecrackers, and one flew into a haystack in front of the temple. The abbot had been out begging for alms, and by the time he returned, half the temple had already burned to the ground. As punishment, Xiahou Lian had been suspended beneath the temple gate to be buffeted by the night winds. From that day on, he'd never touched another firecracker.

On his way back, Xiahou Lian snagged a pheasant. After scaling the mountain path, he passed through the temple gate and wove through a thorny thicket to finally reach his home. It was a simple hut cobbled together from bamboo stalks. There was no space for guests: The main room was split into two halves, one for Xiahou Pei and the other for Xiahou Lian. A small side room served as storage space, and the kitchen was in an outdoor shed.

Xiahou Pei was still in bed, so Xiahou Lian plucked and cleaned the pheasant, then put it in a pot. That pot was an old companion of his—he'd been cooking with it since he was eight.

Xiahou Lian's mother had raised him like a stray cat or dog; it was a wonder he'd grown up safe and sound. The happiest days of his life were before he'd turned eight, when Xiahou Pei had worried about leaving him alone and thus brought him along whenever she went down the mountain. She left him in the care of innkeepers while she carried out assassinations and returned by the time he woke up, often carrying roasted sweet potatoes that they would eat together, squatting by the threshold. The potato would be too hot for Xiahou Lian's tender tongue, so he'd need to blow on it repeatedly before he could eat. Xiahou Pei, though, was unfazed by the heat. She'd pretend to blow on the potato for him only to take an enormous bite, devouring half of it in one go. Xiahou Lian would burst into tears as Xiahou Pei collapsed, laughing. Then, as if she were doing a magic trick, she'd pull a second sweet potato from behind her back and hand it to him.

That wasn't the only prank Xiahou Pei played on him. She loved to scare little Xiahou Lian. She filled his head with all sorts of nonsense from a young age: that drinking tea would dye him black, that drinking alcohol would make him stupid, and that not rinsing soap off would cause painful

sores. She warned him that if one of his lost teeth didn’t grow back right away, the rest would fall out. Xiahou Lian spent most of his childhood fretting and anxious. He often had nightmares of losing all his teeth. But that was in the past. After he’d turned eight, Xiahou Pei never took him down the mountain again.

The aroma of cooking pheasant roused Xiahou Pei. Her hair was untied, dark locks streaming down her back like ink. She shuffled over to the pot in wooden clogs, then reached in and tore off a drumstick.

“You’re sad with a saber, but you’re not bad in the kitchen. I’ll talk to that doddering fool and see if we can get you a job as a cook in the village.”

“Get lost!”

Xiahou Lian quickly stir-fried two more dishes and set out a small jug of wine, and Xiahou Pei ate her fill. Once the meal was over, her son seized his chance to broach the topic on his mind.

“Mom, I want to—”

Xiahou Pei didn’t wait for him to finish. With a wave of her hand, she interrupted, “Forget it. Don’t so much as think about it.”

“I haven’t even said anything!”

“I know what you’re going to say.” Xiahou Pei picked her teeth. “You want me to help you save that little shaoye.”

“Just as I expected, my mother and I are of one mind,” Xiahou Lian said, flattering her as he poured her more wine.

“Forget it. He doesn’t want to leave.”

“That was just a momentary lapse of judgement. Mother, you don’t get it—he’s a natural scholar. Dai-xiansheng—*that* Dai Shengyan, you’ve

heard of him, right?—called him ‘talented.’ Dai-xiansheng said his essays rivaled those of Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan and that his poetry is comparable to that of Li Bai and Du Fu.”

In fact, that was how Dai Shengyan had praised the renowned scholar Li Dongyan, but Xiahou Lian appropriated the accolades for Shen Jue, hoping to sway his mother.

Xiahou Pei remained unmoved.

“I’ll ask Qiu-shifu to go with me,” Xiahou Lian said, putting down his chopsticks.

Xiahou Pei snorted. “You think Qiu-laodi will agree?”

Xiahou Lian had no reply.

“If you’ve got the guts, go by yourself. What man relies on his seniors to pave the way for him?”

Xiahou Lian fell silent for a moment, then turned his head away. “You didn’t pave anything. You never cared about me at all. If Qiu-shifu hadn’t taken me with him, I’d have starved to death here.”

When Xiahou Lian was eight, Xiahou Pei had left him alone on the mountain, completely helpless. He sat in the hut bawling until he was too weak to make a sound. Fortunately, Qiu Ye had been returning to the mountain and found Xiahou Lian. He carried him back to his house and gave him food and water, saving Xiahou Lian’s life.

Xiahou Pei looked a little sheepish. “I could make a living when I was eight, so I thought you could, too. I even taught you how to cook and everything before I left. And didn’t you turn out pretty well in the end?”

“My brother too.” Xiahou Lian lowered his head, fidgeting with his fingers. “If not for the Mahoraga, I wouldn’t even know I had a twin.”

Xiahou Pei was silent for a long time. Xiahou Lian glanced up to see her gripping her wine cup, seemingly lost in thought. Lowering his gaze once more, Xiahou Lian pursed his lips. “I found out he’s at the summit of Heimianfo. I’m going to find him.”

South of Mount Niubizi lay a massive cliff. The rock sheared as if split by an axe, but rather than being a pencil-straight drop, the cliff resembled a towering Buddha with hands pressed together in prayer. The rocks and earth of the mountain were dark, and so the Buddha was the same color. The assassins called it Heimianfo—the Black-Faced Buddha.

Xiahou Lian had only seen Heimianfo from afar. He’d thought about climbing it for fun, but it was far too steep and impossible to scale. He had no idea how his brother and the abbot got up or down.

“You’ll see him if you look at your reflection in the water,” quipped Xiahou Pei.

Xiahou Lian slammed the table. This damn woman had never *thought* about looking for his brother. “Mother! How can you say that? Aren’t you afraid that he’ll resent you?!”

“He probably won’t,” Xiahou Pei replied. “Shixin’s turned him into a fool. He only knows how to wield a blade, doesn’t even know how to speak.”

When Xiahou Lian didn’t reply, Xiahou Pei turned away, her untouched wine cup still clutched in her hand. Her hair fell across her face, obscuring her expression. As she finally continued, she sounded like she’d aged years in an instant.

“What good will seeing him do? Sometimes a mistake is just a mistake, Xiao-Lian. No matter how much you struggle or suffer, you can’t undo it.”

“I…I didn’t say you made a mistake. It’s just a little cold,” Xiahou Lian muttered, scratching his head awkwardly.

“I did. Giving birth to you two was my mistake.”

Xiahou Lian froze.

“Didn’t you say I’ve never cared about you?” Xiahou Pei got to her feet, then dug for a stack of documents and tossed them into his arms. “I’ll take you on your mission, kid.”

“Huh? Really?”

“I’ll stand guard at the door. You go in and face him. Win or lose, I won’t intervene or peek in. I’ll only do one thing: eliminate anyone who tries to come in.”

“What if I lose, and he comes out instead?”

“Simple.” Xiahou Pei’s lips curled into a cold smile, arrogant and wild. “I’ll die with you.”

Chapter 33:
Sudden Rain

XIAHOU LIAN REACHED HUIZHOU at the height of the rainy season. In Jiangnan, summer storms came swift and fierce, raindrops fine and dense as embroidery stitches pattering the gray stone roads. A small boat with a black awning glided through the river's mist. Green willows swayed and red peonies bloomed among the black-tiled, white-walled houses that flanked the river.

Wanchun Tower, the largest brothel in Huizhou, stood by the river, a few elegant pleasure boats moored below. Though the brothel didn't entertain customers during the day, its atmosphere remained bustling. Servants on duty shopped for fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish, while the chefs busily prepared cold dishes to serve later. As servant to a maiden named Yuenü, Xiahou Lian had a relatively light workload. He lounged in the walkway near the door, idling.

Yuenü had become the talk of Wanchun Tower, her fame having surpassed that of even their top courtesan. She was soon to marry Lu Qingcang, a recently retired former commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Just a month earlier, Lu Qingcang had visited the pavilion to enjoy music and had taken a liking to Yuenü, who was at that time just a young maid serving tea. Since she'd only been sold to the brothel a few months earlier, it was an extraordinary twist of fate. At thirteen years old, she was still a budding flower learning to complete menial chores, yet she'd managed to capture Lu Qingcang's attention, just like that.

Marrying a wealthy, influential man was a courtesan's best way out of her predicament—especially a man like Lu Qingcang, who had served as commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard and enjoyed the emperor's favor. Even after Lu Qingcang's retirement, the emperor had honored him with a plaque commemorating his service.

At thirteen, Yuenü was still an ignorant young girl. She knew it was sad that her parents had sold her to a brothel, but she didn't yet understand that marrying a former commander was generally something to celebrate. Xiahou Lian, her newly purchased servant, was to accompany her to the Lu family as part of her dowry. Two days earlier, when the Lus came to deliver her betrothal gifts, Yuenü had tilted her small face upward amid the flickering lanterns and whispered, "Xiao-Lian, are you scared?"

What do I have to be scared of? You're the one who should be afraid, Xiahou Lian thought glumly.

He'd heard that Lu Qingcang was an old lecher who took pleasure in tormenting others. From the records, Xiahou Lian knew that several of the bastard's concubines had met untimely and suspicious ends, their faces shrouded as their bodies were carried from the Lu residence, their families silenced through bribes. But none of that mattered, since Xiahou Lian would kill Lu Qingcang before he could lay a hand on Yuenü, or die trying. He was determined that, one way or another, the wedding night would never happen.

"Don't worry about others when you should be worrying about yourself," a familiar voice said from out of eyeshot. Xiahou Lian looked up to see Qiu Ye approaching. It was as if Qiu Ye could read Xiahou Lian's mind—with just one glance at Xiahou Lian's expression, Qiu Ye already knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Why are you here, Qiu-shifu?”

“I’m your ‘sheath’ this time. Once you and your mother complete the mission, I’ll have men waiting in the alley to cover your retreat.”

Complete the mission. Xiahou Lian froze momentarily. He’d attempted three assassinations and failed every time. Could he really succeed now? Scuffing his foot against the mud between the stones, he asked, “Could you talk my mother out of this? I can handle things alone. At worst, I’ll die. Does she really have to push me like this? If I succeed, fine, but if I’m killed in there, Lu Qingcang will come out and kill her too. Our entire family, wiped out at the Lu residence. Wouldn’t that just be plain stupid?!”

Qiu Ye tapped his black-lacquered fan against his palm and shook his head. “Once your mother makes up her mind, ten horses couldn’t stop her. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Ha.”

The rain gradually let up, and Huizhou City slowly emerged from the dissipating mist as if a gossamer veil had lifted. The clearer weather should’ve lifted Xiahou Lian’s spirits, but his heart remained heavy; he couldn’t relax.

“Shifu,” he said, gazing up at the deep-blue sky. “Why must we do this? Is it really worth it? It’s true Lu Qingcang is an old lecher trying to wed a young girl, and that he enjoys torturing people. But he’s also Wei De’s rival. He was the son of the emperor’s wet nurse, so he’s managed to withstand Wei De in court and has saved many loyal officials from his clutches. Now he’s finally home again, hoping to live out his remaining

years in peace, only for us to ruin everything. If we kill Lu Qingcang, won't we be traitors to Great Qi?"

Qiu Ye sat down, smiling. "How upstanding our Xiao-Lian has become."

"I know, I know. We have to obey the Garden's orders. I'm just venting."

"I shouldn't tell you this, but as long as you don't go telling others, it's fine," Qiu Ye said. "Do you know who wants Lu Qingcang dead?"

"Enemies of his, right? He's been fighting and killing all his life. He must have a mountain of them."

"The Embroidered Uniform Guard: hounds of the emperor, claws of the royal family. Lu Qingcang is no different from Wei De. Wei De has framed loyal officials, but Lu Qingcang killed plenty of people himself. In the second year of Xuanhe, Yao Xing, a scribe of the Central Secretariat, was accused of minting counterfeit coins and driving a peasant to hang himself. His sentencing was left entirely up to Lu Qingcang, who lusted after Yao Xing's young daughter. He threw Yao Xing into the imperial prison, then tried to sway him to give him the girl through bribes and threats both, but Yao Xing refused and killed himself on the spot. To avoid further persecution, the Yao family fled beyond the Western frontier. Now, Yao Xing's daughter has married a prince of the Oirats and has promised Qiye Garden a hundred cattle and a hundred sheep in exchange for Lu Qingcang's head. So, Xiao-Lian, do you think Lu Qingcang deserves to die?"

Xiahou Lian was silent for a very long time. "Our mountain doesn't even have room for all those cows and sheep."

“At any rate, right and wrong aren’t set in stone—they shift with time,” Qiu Ye continued. “What’s right today might be wrong tomorrow, and what’s wrong today could be right in the future. Take the founding emperor, for example. He came from the fields and lost his parents to famine, but once he ascended, he imposed taxes and forced labor just like those before him. The nobility stayed lofty and untouchable, while his former peers—the peddlers and laborers—remained at the bottom to be treated like dirt. He became what he’d once despised and trampled on those he’d once pitied. So, what do you think? What’s the true definition of right and wrong?”

Xiahou Lian was never one for thinking or analyzing, and he found his head spinning from Qiu Ye’s words. “What are you even saying? Didn’t he just grow corrupt…?”

“Yes. Fate dictated it.” Xiahou Pei suddenly strode up from behind them and sat down next to Xiahou Lian. Taking a bite of an apple, she continued, “Think of a house. The foundation is made of earth and stone, the frame of bricks and wood, and the roof of tiles. Where there’s a house, there must be earth and stone, meaning something—someone—is bound to be at the bottom. In the same vein, where there’s enmity, the Garden—and people like us—must also exist to settle people’s scores. For the Garden, there’s no right or wrong, only debts and grudges. You don’t like this trade? That’s fine. Look at the founding emperor. He didn’t want to be a farmer, so he started a rebellion and overthrew the previous dynasty. You too can—”

“—destroy the Garden,” Qiu Ye finished her sentence, smiling.

Xiahou Lian shook his head. “Don’t joke around. If I destroy the Garden, we’ll all die painfully of Seven Fifteen poisoning.”

Xiahou Pei shrugged. “When you make a choice, you have to bear the consequences. That’s the price you must pay to walk that path. Don’t like it? Stop whining and do your job.”

So, in the end, there was still no way out. “Easy for you to say,” snapped Xiahou Lian. “Why don’t you two do it yourselves?”

“Because we’re not good, upstanding people,” Xiahou Pei laughed. “Who would’ve thought that I—the bloodthirsty, murderous Garuda whose name alone frightens crying children into silence—would raise such a good-hearted son?”

“Screw you.” With that, Xiahou Lian stood and walked inside, ignoring them.

Qiu Ye and Xiahou Pei remained seated in the walkway, seemingly in the mood to continue chatting.

“How’s your back?” asked Qiu Ye.

Xiahou Lian had been sentenced to eighty-one lashes for letting Xie Jinglan escape, but he’d passed out after thirty. Xiahou Pei had taken the remaining lashes in his stead. At the time, her wounds from fighting the Chakravarti hadn’t yet healed, and piling new injuries atop those had left her with lasting health issues that often caused excruciating pain.

“Same as always. It’s fine—don’t worry about it.” Xiahou Pei crossed her legs, watching raindrops stream down the steps.

Qiu Ye looked at her and sighed heavily. “Blood stains Lu Qingcang’s hands. He’s committed countless crimes; he rose after crossing mountains of corpses and seas of blood. If Xiao-Lian’s first kill is someone like Lu Qingcang, he’s sure to become the strongest assassin in the land.”

“You still believe that?” Xiahou Pei asked with a grin.

“A truly sharp blade must be forged through hatred and tempered by blood,” said Qiu Ye, his gaze dark and penetrating. “You know that even better than I do, Xiahou.”

***

OUTSIDE THE LU RESIDENCE, countless raindrops fell like arrows into the river between the black-tiled, white-walled buildings, the splashes half a foot high. The entire world seemed to roil like the waves of the surging tide.

In contrast to the storm raging inside, the residence’s interior was warm and enveloped in cozy intimacy. Yuenü’s soft, stifled sobs rose gradually, mingling with the patter of the rain.

In the outdoor walkway, Xiahou Lian asked Xiahou Pei, “Before I die, can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Does Qiu-shifu like men or women?” asked Xiahou Lian with a grin.

“Screw you. Get in there.” Xiahou Pei kicked Xiahou Lian into the bridal chamber.

“Who are you?!” a passing servant behind her gasped. Xiahou Pei drew her saber and turned, silencing the man with a slash to the throat.

Red candles burned bright within the room, their light illuminating an elderly but muscular man kneeling at the head of the bed. Tears streaked

Yuenü's face as she clutched the crimson quilt, trying to cover her snow-pale body. Xiahou Lian awkwardly scratched his head.

Lu Qingcang rose from the bed, his chest bare. He was burly, and his body was plastered with old wounds, scars slithering over his chest like centipedes. He seemed much more dangerous than Xiahou Lian, like a specter that'd crawled out of the underworld.

"I always said that I didn't want a bride who'd already had a lover. I wanted a pure girl who was happy to marry into the Lu residence. That greedy bitch! I should've sent someone to investigate." Liu Qingcang narrowed his eyes at Xiahou Lian. "You dare enter my house to grab my woman? You've got guts."

"You've misunderstood, Master. I'm not her lover."

"He's my servant." Yuenü's voice was as faint as a mosquito's buzz.

"Also wrong." Xiahou Lian rested his left hand on his saber's hilt. "I come from Qiye Garden. On the abbot's orders, I'm here to send you to paradise!"

"Ha ha ha! So you're from the Garden." Lu Qingcang's voice was like a tolling bell. "Eight years ago, I witnessed the skills of the Garden's Kinnara. He used a cicada-wing blade to assassinate my battalion commander during a banquet. My commander was still holding a cup, his head bowed. Everyone thought he'd fallen asleep. It wasn't until the banquet was over that we saw his blood pooling all over the floor and realized that the veins in his neck had been severed. Everyone had been too busy drinking to notice."

"The Kinnara is a senior of mine."

“I’ve spilled more than enough blood. I’m not surprised the Garden wants me dead. But I never expected they’d send a babe like you for the job. What, does the Garden consider my venerable self less worthy than a lowly battalion commander?!”

“You’re overthinking it, sir. Allow my humble self to show you the Garden’s sincerity!” As the words left his mouth, Xiahou Lian drew his saber Qianji, its blade glinting like frost.

Lu Qingcang kicked the sword rack, bouncing a long saber into the air. He leapt up and grabbed it. The two blades clashed in the candles’ glow, points gleaming with a cold, jade-like shine.

“You’re not qualified to kill me.” Lu Qingcang glanced toward the door and laughed. “You should get the one outside to do it.”

In the blink of an eye, their blades clashed dozens of times. Lu Qingcang’s attacks were relentless; with each strike, Qianji emitted a mournful whine as if on the verge of breaking. The two weapons collided in a flurry of flashing metal, separated, then met again. Blade struck blade, ringing out like a zither’s resonant twang, melodious and shrill. After dozens of exchanges, the fighters briefly stepped back. The skin between Xiahou Lian’s thumb and forefinger had already split.

“You look barely older than Yuenü. A teenager wants to make an enemy of me?”

“Fourteen is old enough for this,” Xiahou Lian panted.

“What kind of world forces a fourteen-year-old to pick up a sword? Has the Garden no one left?!”

“Hey, Old Master, didn’t anyone teach you to shut up while you’re fighting to the death?!” Xiahou Lian roared hoarsely, lunging at Lu

Qingcang. His saber's strokes were light and fierce, as if it were a black butterfly using its wings as blades.

But Lu Qingcang was in no hurry to retaliate. He crouched slightly, concealing his blade behind his elbow. The moment Xiahou Lian was a mere three paces away, Lu Qingcang finally unsheathed his saber, a cold arc slicing the air like lightning ripping across the night sky. Just when their blades were about to collide, Lu Qingcang twisted, angling his body to the side. Metal ground against metal, the sound harsh and jarring, and Lu Qingcang's blade continued its path forward, cutting into Xiahou Lian's left arm. In a flash, the two combatants parted to stand back-to-back, Lu Qingcang holding his sword aloft. Only a battle-hardened veteran like Lu Qingcang could change his technique so subtly, with such razor-sharp precision. Xiahou Lian was completely helpless to evade him. Blood trickled down his wrist to the hilt of his blade, agony searing his nerves.

"Stand down, child," Lu Qingcang said. "Come back in ten years. Maybe you'll be able to kill me then."

"You're naive, old man. The moment I stepped through that door, this became a fight to the death!" Xiahou Lian spun, gripping his sword as he charged. In the dim candlelight, his black robes fluttered like the wings of a dark moth throwing itself into the flames.

What point was there to killing? Did Lu Qingcang truly deserve to die? He didn't know, and he didn't have it in him to care. All he knew was that he couldn't let the woman outside die here—and that *he* wanted to live!

Outside, rain poured down in torrents. Xiahou Pei slit her twentieth throat, and blood gushed out like a tide, mingling with the rain as it

splattered her blade and streamed down its fuller. She pivoted sharply to face the terrified servants as she delivered a brilliant, breathtaking slash.

Inside, Xiahou Lian swung his sword while Lu Qingcang spun away. The table shattered into splinters; red dates, chestnuts, and lilies to rained down everywhere, like the droplets outside. Abandoning direct confrontation, Xiahou Lian began to mirror Lu Qingcang's sword techniques, twisting his blade at the moment of impact to redirect its force. Though powerful, all of Lu Qingcang's strikes missed their mark, and whenever he failed to dodge in time, Xiahou Lian landed a slash. After dozens of exchanges, Lu Qingcang's body was riddled with superficial wounds.

Death was close at hand, yet Xiahou Lian remained surprisingly calm. He knew the difference between his and Lu Qingcang's abilities, but his opponent was old, his stamina limited. If Xiahou Lian could drag out the fight long enough, then he might just stand a chance once Lu Qingcang finally tired. He sent out a flurry of strikes, lunging at his opponent again and again. The slashes followed one after another, no end in sight.

But then Lu Qingcang suddenly sidestepped, and Xiahou Lian's saber sliced through empty air!

Momentum broken, Xiahou Lian couldn't turn in time. Lu Qingcang raised his saber high and brought it down with mountain-crushing force. In that fleeting instant, time seemed to slow, and Xiahou Lian could only watch as the blade descended toward him, poised to cleave his skull.

He suddenly understood. Lu Qingcang hadn't been incapable of weathering his flurry of attacks. Rather, he'd lured Xiahou Lian into building up momentum he couldn't pull out of. His rapid slashes had fallen

into a predictable pattern, and he'd grown too used to them to adapt. That was when Lu Qingcang launched his counterattack.

This was how a true veteran of the battlefield fought, armed not only with unrivaled swordplay, but with unmatched tactical brilliance as well.

But who says I have to stop here?!

Xiahou Lian refused to retreat. With fearless determination, he charged forward. Leaving his chest open to Lu Qingcang's blade, he risked closing the distance to swing his own saber. Glints of light scattered, snow-like, as the blade aimed for Lu Qingcang's shoulder. Xiahou Lian was gambling on nerve, ready to trade his life just to take out Lu Qingcang's arm. Lu Qingcang wouldn't dare take that gamble, but Xiahou Lian would!

"It's been a while since I came across a young man like you," Lu Qingcang said with a faint chuckle, pulling back his blade before slashing forward once more. The two blades clashed, and Xiahou Lian and Lu Qingcang locked eyes.

"You flatter me, old man!" Xiahou Lian said through gritted teeth.

"Let's see if you can block this!" Lu Qingcang suddenly dashed forward. He gripped his saber in both hands and brought it down, the weight of mountains and seas behind it.

Xiahou Lian raised his saber to block. The two blades collided with a piercing screech, but he held his ground.

A sharp crack echoed through the air, however, as the glinting edge before him shattered. Xiahou Lian's mind went blank as he stumbled back and fell to the ground. Blinding pain seared his chest as Lu Qingcang's saber carved open a deep gash from which blood gushed in a torrent.

Qianji had broken. *Fuck!*

Lu Qingcang seized his chance and lunged forward. Xiahou Lian quickly grabbed a nearby stool to use as a shield. On top of him now, Lu Qingcang gripped his saber with both hands and stabbed downward, the blade's point hurtling toward Xiahou Lian's face. Xiahou Lian clenched his teeth, holding up the stool with all his might. The saber's sharp tip was mere inches from his forehead.

Trembling, Lu Qingcang's blade edged closer and nicked Xiahou Lian's brow. Blood trickled along his eye socket. The tip crept downward—three inches, then two—until it hovered over his right eye. Lu Qingcang's bloodshot eyes glared down at him with the gaze of an enraged demon.

Blood continued to pour from the wound on Xiahou Lian's chest, sapping his strength. He gritted his teeth, the veins on his forehead bulging grotesquely.

Suddenly, Lu Qingcang's body shuddered violently, and the immense force against Xiahou Lian's stool vanished. Lu Qingcang collapsed to the side to reveal Yuenü standing behind him. She dropped the broken blade from her hand, stumbling backward as she fell to the ground. Her lips trembled.

"It wasn't me…" she whispered. "It wasn't… I didn't mean to kill him… I didn't want to…but…but I didn't want to marry him…"

Like a taut string suddenly snapping, Xiahou Lian's body sagged, drained of all strength. He couldn't even stand.

Lu Qingcang lay sprawled on the ground, his eyes wide and fixed on Yuenü. He'd never imagined that he would perish not on the battlefield, nor to assassins, but at the hands of a frail young girl. Xiahou Lian watched as the strength drained from Lu Qingcang's arms, his furious eyes dulling into

hollow, lifeless pits until he was nothing more than an empty shell stripped of all consciousness.

Xiahou Lian sucked in a deep breath and slowly stood. He picked up Lu Qingcang's saber and pushed the door open to step outside.

Rain poured down in torrents. The courtyard was littered with bodies, and bloody rainwater streamed over the ground. It seemed as though the entire Lu household had met their ends here. The residence was eerily quiet, save for the patter of rain and the wail of wind. A spectral assassin stood with her back to him, staring up at the rain-soaked heavens, her slender figure like a solitary, ancient bamboo.

"Mother, I won," said Xiahou Lian, wiping the blood from his face. Even though it was over, he felt no joy at all. Without thinking, he drew in a deep breath, filling his nostrils with the metallic tang of blood.

"You're a true assassin now, Xiao-Lian." Her voice was hoarse. "A man has to stand on his own. Your mother can't shield you forever. You need to learn to protect yourself—and the people who matter to you."

"Mother…"

A long bolt of lightning split the sky, ripping a jagged rift in the heavens. For a split second, the world blanched; in that fleeting moment, Xiahou Lian caught sight of a dark stain blooming like spilled ink across his mother's back. She was dressed in black, and he couldn't tell what the stain was: rain, sweat…or blood.

The answer came quickly. Xiahou Lian noticed a dark red trail winding away from Xiahou Pei's feet like a cold snake slithering across the ground. It mingled with the rain, spreading into a crimson puddle. Xiahou

Pei trembled like a withered leaf in harsh wind as she slowly slumped forward.

“Mother!”

Chapter 34:
A Climb into the Heavens

As dusk fell, the setting sun sank behind the palace rooftops, spreading a delicate golden sheen over the glazed tiles. From afar, they looked like scattered shards of gold.

Shen Jue himself carried a bowl of ginseng soup to Chengqian Palace. The palace now belonged to a new mistress, Noble Consort Li, who'd recently given birth to the second prince. The consort who'd passed away in Chengqian Palace three years earlier was already a distant memory. In the palace, death was like extinguishing a lamp; the light of even the most brilliant and favored vanished like smoke. The courtyards where lives had ended received new occupants, as if the emperor's favor alone could keep any lingering spirits at bay.

Was there a single courtyard within the palace's spiraling depths that was still a stranger to death?

Shen Jue's head was bowed as he stepped over the threshold and through the circular archway. Consort Li sat on her throne, her icy gaze trained on him. Her facial features were subtle and delicate, not particularly striking. As a low-ranking concubine in a sky-blue pleated skirt, her gentle sweetness had caught the emperor's eye, and a single fortunate night with her had led to the second prince's birth. Once kind and amiable, Consort Li now sat adorned in jewels and radiated haughty arrogance.

"Where is His Majesty?" Consort Li asked coldly, examining the red polish on her nails.

“His Majesty has been swamped with affairs of state. He rises early and goes to bed late, so he hasn’t had the chance to visit Your Highness. But rest assured that he always thinks of you. As soon as he finished with the court officials, he asked this humble servant to bring you this ginseng soup,” Shen Jue said with a perfectly measured smile as precise as embroidery on a garment or the carvings on a beam—just right, never overdone. “His Majesty instructed your servant to ensure that Your Highness finishes the soup before he leaves.”

Consort Li waved her hand. A maid approached Shen Jue, took the soup, and presented to her.

Head lowered, Consort Li stirred the oil droplets on the broth’s surface with her spoon. “The ginseng soup arrives daily, but His Majesty hasn’t visited even once! What—does he think I got fat and ugly after giving birth?” She shot Shen Jue a sharp glance, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “Or is it because you scoundrels keep bringing him beautiful women to win his favor?! Do you think I’m clueless? The Yangzhou Companion Wei-gonggong gave him just days ago was stunning. I heard that His Majesty keeps her at his side at all times—even in the leopard enclosure! A beauty and the beasts—a perfect match!”

Shen Jue bowed his head even farther. “Your Highness jests. She’s merely a passing fancy to His Majesty—a momentary novelty, nothing more. How could she ever compare to you? She doesn’t even have a title to her name. Why not just ignore her, Your Highness?”

“If I do, you’ll soon all be ignoring *me*!” Teeth clenched in anger, she hurled the tray and soup bowl at Shen Jue.

Shen Jue remained still. The bowl missed him and shattered on the floor with the sharp crack of breaking ice, but the wooden tray struck his temple. Crimson blood trickled down, following the strap of his black gauze hat.

Gasps rose around Consort Li. Shen Jue was the undersecretary of the Directorate of Ceremonial and a favorite of Wei De; the emperor himself trusted him and consulted him on many matters. No one in the court nor the inner palace dared disrespect him. Consort Li's boldness in treating him so harshly left those around her shaking in fear.

Yet the smile on Shen Jue's lips didn't waver. It was as if he hadn't been injured at all. Bowing slightly, he said, "Your Highness is overthinking things. You are the mistress; we are the servants. How could a servant ignore their master? You've just given birth, and you're still weak, so you accidentally spilled the soup. I'll fetch another bowl from the kitchen right away."

Consort Li was about to erupt again when a maid discreetly tugged her sleeve, reminding her that Shen Jue was close to the emperor. If the emperor saw his injury and concluded that Consort Li was arrogant and overbearing, she might lose the favor she'd earned by giving birth to the second prince. Consort Li flicked her sleeve and coughed once. "Then the injury on your face…"

"Your servant accidentally fell and injured himself. Your Highness need not worry."

"Hmm. Be more careful when walking." Consort Li cleared her throat, maintaining her haughty demeanor. "I am a noble consort and the mother of the second prince. You're a smart man, Shen-gonggong—you

should understand that pledging loyalty to me will only benefit you in the future."

Shen Jue seemed to remain unmoved, his expression as steady as a mountain. "Your Highness jests. This humble servant serves in the Directorate of Ceremonial. My job is to share in His Majesty's burdens."

"Hmph. Ungrateful wretch!" Consort Li glared at him. "Dismissed!"

When Shen Jue left, Consort Li slumped against her throne and let out a long breath.

The maid beside her frowned. "Why did you do that, Your Highness?! If Shen-gonggong hadn't hinted that the ginseng soup was tampered with, you'd be spending your days bedridden! You certainly wouldn't be as healthy as you are now, would you?"

"I was just putting on an act! I've eaten so well these past few days… Who knew I'd be strong enough to actually hit him when I threw the bowl? Can you blame me?" Consort Li muttered, twisting her handkerchief. "That man—he didn't even dodge."

"Ah… What are we to do? That old bastard Wei De wants to get rid of both mother and child in one fell swoop. The ginseng soup comes every day—we've tossed it out, poured it away in secret, even watered the orchid on the windowsill with it and withered the flower."

The ginseng soup hadn't stopped coming since the second prince's birth. At first, Consort Li was overjoyed and grateful, assuming her luck had turned and she'd finally won the emperor's favor. Soon after, though, she started feeling weak and dizzy and needed to spend most of her time seated or lying down. The imperial physicians found no issues. Her mysterious illness had continued until last month, when Shen Jue had taken

over delivering the soup and left behind a handkerchief reading: *The soup is poisoned*. Only then had Consort Li and her maids realized what was going on, which left them shaken and terrified.

The first prince's legs were damaged. A healthy new prince would be strong competition, no matter how young he was. Wei De was close to the first prince, but he had the emperor's trust, and everything passed through his hands; it would've been easy for him to tamper with the soup.

Consort Li wasn't an ambitious woman, but this was the hand fate had dealt her. His Majesty had only two children, and one was bound to become the future emperor. She had no choice but to fight. After a moment of thought, she rose to her feet and slammed the table.

"That old bastard Wei De won't rest until he sees me on my deathbed. Fine—let him have his way. Claim I'm ill, and shut the palace gates!"

Outside Chengqian Palace, Shen Jue pulled out an embroidered handkerchief and pressed it to his temple, glancing down to see that the blood had already stained his collar. Shen Wenxing, a young eunuch who awaited Shen Jue on the palace avenue, was startled at his bloodied appearance.

"Godfather?! What happened?!" he asked anxiously.

Shen Jue had adopted Shen Wenxing as his godson earlier that year. Eunuchs couldn't have children, so they commonly took in godsons; isolated, they adopted for companionship. After such an adoption, the two eunuchs would call each other "Godfather" and "Godson"; it was something to bring them joy and cheer. When the elder eunuch passed from old age, their godson would be there to see them off.

Shen Jue, however, cared nothing for the joy and solace of the relationship; he merely wished to build his influence. Adopting a godson meant providing guidance and support. In exchange, his godson would act as his most devoted confidant. Shen Wenxing was twelve years old. Before entering the palace at the age of eight, he'd been a street urchin who caused no shortage of mischief. When he schemed, his sly demeanor lent him a slight resemblance to Xiahou Lian. Perhaps that was why Shen Jue had decided to take him in.

"It's nothing," Shen Jue told him. "Just a minor injury."

Shen Wenxing glanced at him with concern. His godfather was an unearthly beauty—what would he do if that beauty was marred? "Your godson has some ointment for wounds that prevents scars. I'll bring it to you later."

Shen Jue shook his head, declining. "What about the task I assigned to you?"

"There's been some progress," Shen Wenxing whispered. "Word from the south is that an elder in Miaojiang mentioned something strange: Fifty years ago, a group of masked, black-robed figures bought up all the azalea blossoms and seeds, then took several herbalists with them. The herbalists never returned. It's far too suspicious—I'd wager those black-robed figures were assassins from the Garden, and they probably silenced the herbalists." He pulled a piece of paper from his sleeve and handed it to Shen Jue. "Here's the azalea flower the elder drew. Your godson has already sent people to search for it using the sketch. Given Miaojiang's lush vegetation, wild azaleas are bound to be growing somewhere."

“Well done,” Shen Jue nodded. “Split our men into two teams—one will keep searching for the azaleas, and the other will investigate what really went on with those black-robed men. Let me know right away if you find anything.”

Shen Wenxing bowed and nodded. “It’s thanks to your vast knowledge and keen insight, Godfather.” he said obsequiously, remembering to throw in some flattery. “If you hadn’t discovered in the local chronicles of Yunnan and Guizhou that the azalea’s poison resembles Seven Fifteen, we’d still be running in circles.”

Still, Shen Jue felt that their progress was too slow. *He* could afford to take his time investigating, but could Xiahou Lian wait? Over the years, he’d searched for any news of Xiahou Lian, but he hadn’t found any trace of him in the jianghu. Shen Jue couldn’t say whether Xiahou Lian had failed to make a name for himself or was already dead. He pressed his lips together, silent.

Shen Wenxing observed his expression. When Shen Jue wasn’t smiling, his features had a cold elegance, like winter snow on plum branches or moonlight over a desolate mountain.

After parting with Shen Wenxing, Shen Jue returned to his quarters to change into fresh clothes, then set off to report to Wei De.

The sky had darkened, and the palace lanterns flared to life one by one, creating a brilliant sea that rivaled daylight. As Shen Jue stepped into the Document Office, the eunuchs inside rose to their feet and greeted him respectfully. “Shen-gonggong,” they chorused.

Shen Jue nodded at them in greeting, then turned to head past the curtain partition. Behind that, Wei De was teasing a caged bird with a silver

hook. “You’re back?” he asked lackadaisically.

“Peace be with you, Father.”

Wei De glanced at the wound on Shen Jue’s temple and sneered. “Completely worthless, that one. She’s already rejected nine of the last ten servings of ginseng soup. Such arrogance, all because she was shown some favor. Even with the second prince as a shield, her good days won’t last forever.”

Wei De handed the silver hook to Shen Jue, who accepted it respectfully, then followed him slowly.

Wei De sat down on the throne behind the curtain, idly twirling the polished prayer beads on his wrist. “Women—give one some favor and a son, and she’ll think she has it all. In theory, that might make sense. But who’s to say how things will turn out in the end?” he asked meaningfully. “And whether a baby in swaddling clothes can make it to adulthood is a question in itself.”

These were terribly treasonous words, yet Shen Jue showed no reaction. His expression was calm, as if Wei De were describing trivial household affairs. Wei De studied Shen Jue intently. Seeing his composure, he smiled in satisfaction.

“Jue-er, you’ve grown. That inept fool Xiao Yan seized someone’s estate, and the censors impeached him. The emperor plans to dismiss him. The Eastern Depot can’t be left without a chief, so I’ve already requested a decree from the emperor—tomorrow, you’ll take charge of the Eastern Depot.”

At those words, Shen Jue’s eyelashes fluttered. He prostrated himself.

“Thank you, Father,” he said, his voice clear as a chime. “For your sake, your son will endure fire and water without hesitation!”

Chapter 35:
A Blithe Departure

SNOW HAD BEGUN TO FALL on the mountain. Bundled in a thick coat, Xiahou Lian sat in the walkway with his knees drawn up, gazing at the snowflakes that fluttered in the courtyard like pear blossoms. His mother would normally have returned by now—she loathed the cold and rarely ventured out in winter, preferring to stay beneath her blankets. Yet, even as the snowfall grew heavier, there was still no sign of her.

Had she brought any “sheaths”—backup assigned by the Garden to aid an assassin during a mission—with her?

Back when Xiahou Pei left, the mountain had blazed with red leaves. She’d sauntered into the crimson forest, a wine jug in one hand and a blade in the other, as though into an endless inferno. Xiahou Lian had called after her to remind her to bring a sheath or two. Such a sheath was there to ensure that an assassin escaped whether a mission succeeded or failed. After all, a skilled assassin was a precious commodity, especially a legendary sword master as renowned as Xiahou Pei. If anything befell her, it would be a huge blow to the Garden, an institution already suffering for money.

Xiahou Pei hadn’t even glanced back. She’d simply waved and confidently promised that she’d bring a sheath this time.

Three years had passed since Xiahou Lian’s first solo assassination. Only now had he learned that his mother took fifty-one of his lashes for letting Shen Jue escape, leaving her with chronic injuries. Seeing the always-indomitable Xiahou Pei collapse before him had finally shattered

the illusion of her invincibility. She was a legend in his eyes, but ultimately, she was still human. At that point, Xiahou Lian started obediently carrying out his missions without another word of complaint, as though he'd grown up overnight.

Over the previous three years, he'd gone through as many blades. Aside from the Eight Legions, Garden assassins didn't hold official titles; in the jianghu, they were usually identified by the name etched on their blade. But Xiahou Lian switched his every year, leaving everyone in the dark as to who the nameless assassin was. Some quietly referred to him as the Wuminggui.[1]

Xiahou Lian stared blankly at the empty courtyard, feeling inexplicably restless. He got up and wandered into Xiahou Pei's room, where he began rummaging through her papers. A messy heap of books lay by the bed, mostly fiction books she'd collected from who-knew-where.

It took a while, but Xiahou Lian finally unearthed the mission brief for her current assignment: a page packed with tiny characters. He lit a lamp and sat at the desk.

Xiahou Pei's target was Liu Guicang, the master of Jingdao Villa in Liuzhou. Xiahou Lian had heard of him—he was a famous master of swordplay in the jianghu and an heir to katana saber[2] techniques. Thirteen years earlier, Liu Guicang had challenged sixteen sects on three different mountains, and he'd won every duel, even forcing one sect to shut its doors and stop accepting disciples. From that point on, his name spread far and wide, and none dared cross blades with him.

When Xiahou Lian heard the man's name, though, it was never because of his achievements. After all, rumors rarely spread far without a

bit of scandal to capture people's imaginations. Liu Guicang had spent most of his life building his reputation, only to see it ruined by his own inner courtyard.

The swordsman had a harem of wives and concubines rivaling even the emperor's. He treated them well, frequently inviting opera troupes to the villa to keep them entertained. But one day, after listening to *Romance of the West Chamber*,[3] a less-favored concubine ran off with a disciple from the villa. Furious, Liu Guicang chased them from Liuzhou all the way to the northern border, catching up just as they were about to cross the frontier. He dragged the man to the summit of Mount Tai and ground his bones to dust, then sank the woman's body in the East Sea, ensuring the lovers would never reunite even in death.

The incident was a hot topic for a while. Some were horrified by Liu Guicang's cruelty, while others mourned the lovers' tragic fate. Public attention didn't shift until Consort Li gave birth to the second prince and the overjoyed emperor declared a general amnesty; only then did the scandal fade into memory.

In Xiahou Lian's opinion, Liu Guicang had just been trying to salvage his own dignity. Although the concubine wasn't one of the swordsman's favorites, he chased her relentlessly because she'd cuckolded and thus humiliated him.

But how would Liu Guicang's swordplay measure up against Xiahou Pei's? The abbot had once described her blade as devoid of hatred, impurity, or emotion—as truly embodying life and death. Xiahou Lian, never one for studying, hadn't fully grasped the abbot's meaning. He

figured the abbot was merely saying that his mother was amazingly skilled with a blade.

The snow fell more heavily, the soft rustle of flakes blanketing the world outside. Xiahou Lian shuffled to the window and swung it open. The mountain peaks were already cloaked in white.

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THAT EVENING, there was a downpour in Liuzhou. The dense forest lay shrouded in shadows, towering beech trees looming like ghostly shades. Gasping for air, an assassin weaved through the undergrowth, her every step stamping a bloody mark onto the damp, decaying leaves. Behind her, dozens of the villa's disciples gave relentless chase, their long blades gleaming like snow in the darkness.

Where was her sheath—her backup? She'd run for so long, and the person who should've been there was nowhere to be seen.

For the first time, panic flickered through the bleeding assassin's eyes. Her shoulders and back throbbed with fiery pain while the wounds on her waist, arms, and thighs felt like gaping holes out of which the last remnants of her blood and strength were draining. The villa's disciples seemed to know her every move; whichever path she took, they were lying in wait to ambush her. There was no way out—no chance of escape.

Finally, she came to a halt. Raindrops fell like arrows from the heavens, piercing her already-burdened shoulders. Pain. Excruciating pain.

The disciples closed in, their cold blades pointed at the cornered assassin. “You have nowhere to run, Garuda. Surrender!”

How many years had passed since she last heard such words? Fifteen years ago, thirty men had stood in her way. Wielding Hengbo, she’d decapitated fifteen, severed the limbs of eight more, and driven her blade through the hearts of seven others. She’d emerged drenched in blood like a demonic asura from the depths of hell. That battle made her a legend. Thereafter, the name “Garuda” was synonymous with Death itself. Anyone who caught sight of Hengbo knew death was close.

Now, the Garuda let out a wild, mocking laugh, arrogant and unbridled as ever. “Nowhere to run? There’s always somewhere to go—whether it’s heaven or hell! You think you frighten the likes of me?”

Raised over her chest, Hengbo shone like a crescent moon. The assassin prepared to strike. One head for every swing.

“Wait!” a deep voice suddenly bellowed.

The disciples parted to create a narrow passage. Saber in hand, a tall, burly man slowly approached through the pouring rain.

“I am your enemy, Garuda,” Liu Guicang said, stopping just over three feet from Xiahou Pei.

Their sabers were each three feet long and couldn’t strike from this range, so they stood at the safest distance that still allowed for a quick attack. The gap between them wasn’t much greater than three feet: A single step forward, and the battle would commence.

“I’ve been awaiting you,” he continued. “I knew you’d come eventually. It’s only natural that the world’s best assassin would come for me, the world’s best swordsman.” He was a burly, middle-aged man with

graying hair and deep, ravine-like wrinkles carving his face. His eyes were sharp and cold, like a hawk's.

"Sorry," Xiahou Pei said with a provocative smile. "I'm the world's best assassin, yes—and the world's best swordsman as well."

"Arrogant, as expected." Liu Guicang chuckled softly, though his smile was stiff, as though he was forcing the corners of his mouth up. "All titles are meaningless labels assigned by others. Whether you're actually the world's best doesn't matter—what matters is how those fools perceive it. I'll admit I'm curious about your swordplay, but you won't defeat me. You're destined to die here, and the entire world will know that I, Liu Guicang, killed the Garuda."

Xiahou Pei chuckled, her eyes full of infuriating mockery. "Hey, you ugly freak. Know why you'll never become the number one swordsman?"

"Why?" Liu Guicang asked, ignoring her insult.

"To be the best swordsman, you must first become a sword yourself. But you've got so many crooked thoughts, you're better off staying human!" Xiahou Pei crouched slightly, then lunged like a leopard. Hengbo clashed with Liu Guicang's saber, scattering sparks through the air.

Liu Guicang sidestepped and parried her next strike. "Such a calm, composed assassin! Want to know why you're going to die here?"

Xiahou Pei sneered. "I don't have time to waste listening to you! There's an idiot waiting for me back home, so I'm in a fucking hurry!"

Her saber's glare instantly engulfed Liu Guicang. Even the heavy rain seemed to recoil from her unyielding, relentless blows, watery curtains parting before Hengbo's razor-sharp edge. Liu Guicang struggled to track

her blade, and he was forced to rely on his instincts—honed for years—to avoid her thunderous onslaught.

This was impossible. Xiahou Pei was covered in wounds. How was she still so agile?!

The woman's eyes shone like a demon's in the dark, as if she could see through Liu Guicang's every move and predict his next steps. She wasn't a demon, however. Liu Guicang observed her calmly—the way she breathed, the way she slashed with her blade. She was human, and humans tired. Humans weakened.

Sure enough, Xiahou Pei finally faltered. Her rhythm broke, and openings began to appear in her once-seamless technique. Her relentless assault had just been a fleeting flash, a last-ditch rally. Liu Guicang seized his chance and thrust his saber toward her heart.

Xiahou Pei clenched her teeth, using her shoulder to absorb the potentially fatal strike. With her left hand, she fired an arrow hidden in her sleeve. It cut through the darkness and hit its mark, burying itself in Liu Guicang's right eye.

He'd forgotten. She wasn't just a sword master—she was an assassin too. Liu Guicang screamed in agony as his disciples scrambled to his side.

Xiahou Pei slumped against a tree, breathing hard but chuckling. "How nice! Now you're an ugly, one-eyed freak."

"Kill her!" Liu Guicang roared, his intact eye fixed on Xiahou Pei. "Cut off her head, dismember her body, and throw her remains into the marketplace. Let her be blasted by the sun and wind, so that all the world will know the Garuda's fate!"

His disciples swarmed like raptors closing in on their prey. Xiahou Pei howled. She was a demon drenched in blood, a lone wolf charging headlong into death. Her saber sliced through the darkness, ruthless and unyielding. Under the pitch-black night sky, not a single star was visible. There was only the relentless, savage rain, mercilessly battering her face.

She recalled standing on Heimianfo's summit many years ago. A black-robed monk had silently approached her from behind.

"You should hand Xiahou Lian over to me," the monk had said.

"Hey, you damn bald donkey,[4] don't tell me you're going back on your word," she'd replied.

"You are invincible because you're free from attachments. Wielding Hengbo has come as naturally as moving your own arm. But now Hengbo bears a burden—a growing weight that you will one day be unable to lift."

From Heimianfo's peak, the entire mountain had stretched before her. Xiahou Pei gazed into the distance, where pine forests undulated like waves, rising and falling endlessly. She squinted as if catching a fleeting glimpse of a muddy little boy darting between the trees. Her typically cold gaze rippled as if a gentle breeze had skimmed across still water, each ripple holding unspoken warmth. She'd never worn that expression before.

"What's there to fear?" she remembered asking. "One day, he'll grow into a man capable of standing on his own two feet, and I'll never need to wield Hengbo again."

Blood and rain now mingled on her face; the sound of tearing flesh echoed nearby. She could see the disciples' faces—some fearful, some vicious, some crazed. Her foes fought fiercely back and forth in the torrential downpour until death claimed them.

With the last swing of her blade, she thought for a fleeting moment that she saw that child again—the one with stars shining his eyes.

“Xiao-Lian—” *From now on, Xiao-Lian, you’ll have to battle through the night on your own. Promise me you won’t be scared. Even if the storm rages on and the darkness is as heavy as iron, you will crush your enemies and every thorn in your path to dust beneath your feet. May your blade remain unbroken, may you weather the storms ahead, and may you find the light of daybreak within the depths of the endless night.*

Five sabers struck her left arm; three slashed into her legs. As countless blades pierced her back, she collapsed to her knees. Hengbo landed at the disciples’ feet and was trampled into the mud.

With her last shred of strength, Xiahou Pei pulled a dagger from her waist and slashed at her own face. The blades on her back ceased their assault, but the disciples began kicking and stomping on her instead, so that more of them could join the assault on the Garuda. Her bones shattered; her left arm hung limp and useless.

By the time they rolled her over, she’d already been dead for some time.

Liu Guicang ordered his disciples to lift her up. Two grabbed her arms to yank her upright, but that pulled her left arm off, and her body slumped again. They grabbed her around the waist instead and hoisted her up once more.

Liu Guicang bent and retrieved Hengbo from the ground. With a single swing, he cleaved off the Garuda’s head.

Chapter 36:
Without a Trace

"XIAO-LIAN—"

Half-asleep, Xiahou Lian thought he heard his mother's voice call faintly, as if from a distant mountain. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up in bed, then slowly walked to the door and pushed it open. A blast of cold wind rushed in, sending a sharp shiver through his body.

"Mother?" he called out. "Are you back?"

No one answered.

He opened the door to Xiahou Pei's room, but it looked the same as it had yesterday—there was no sign that she'd returned. Panic rose in his chest. Grabbing his coat, he ran to Qiu Ye's house.

Qiu Ye was feeding the chickens; he had a few feathers stuck to his felt hat.

"Shifu! My mother's still not back!" Xiahou Lian called from behind the fence.

"Something on the way might've slowed her down," Qiu Ye said, looking up at him. "Don't worry, Xiao-Lian."

"I know," Xiahou Lian said. "I'm sure she just got slowed down. But I want to go meet her. With the mountain all snowed in, I'm worried she'll get lost."

"Go ahead, Xiao-Lian," Qiu Ye said gently. "No one will stop you. But remember to take the antidote from the alms bowl in the temple."

Xiahou Lian nodded hard and ran off.

The ruins of the mountain temple, with their broken pillars and beams laid bare, couldn't block the icy winds sweeping through Tianwang Hall. A monk in black robes—the abbot—sat huddled at the foot of a Buddha statue, rhythmically striking a temple block with a stick.

Xiahou Lian crept up behind the abbot and reached for the alms bowl beside his cushion. It was full of dark pills, just enough for all the assassins. Xiahou Lian took two, then silently retreated. As he exited Tianwang Hall, the abbot stirred and opened his eyes as though just waking from slumber, then calmly turned a page of the scripture.

Xiahou Lian stole Uncle Duan's old horse and a jug of wine, slung a bag over his shoulder, and braved the snowstorm alone to descend the mountain. No one could have guessed how he made it to the base. When he emerged there, covered head to toe in snow, he looked like a snowman; the villagers at first mistook him for a mountain spirit. Uncle Duan's old horse was on its last legs, so Xiahou Lian swapped it for another, then rode day and night to Liuzhou.

Liuzhou was a small city, spanning just five hundred yards from north to south. Arriving at dawn, Xiahou Lian dismounted at the city gate and used a map to begin searching for hidden Garden bases. There were five such bases in Liuzhou, and each ran a secret den where assassins could rest; the assassins called them "relay stations." These dens were often hidden in the homes of undercover agents, sometimes in cellars or secret chambers behind cabinets. The agents were usually ordinary civilians. Some even appeared to live in poverty, but when the doors to their homes opened, one found Russian carpets, walls embedded with luminous pearls, and even golden chamber pots. In the capital, the dens went a step further,

offering courtesans to entertain the visiting assassins. The abbot was too stingy to repair the mountain temple, but he spared no expense adorning the hidden dens—all to ensure that the assassins were at their best when it came time to deliver a fatal strike.

Xiahou Pei rarely stayed in the dens. She found them cramped and stuffy, and the agents' cooking often failed to meet her standards. Every year, she would help herself to Qiu Ye's human-faced masks, then lodge boldly in the finest inns and feast at the best restaurants, even picking fights with drunkards when the mood struck. Though she was a solitary assassin, Xiahou Pei loved bustling places. Back when she still brought the young Xiahou Lian down the mountain, she often took him to temples to watch operas or to brothels to listen to songs. Little Xiahou Lian would be passed from one girl to another as they teased and prodded him, their soft bosoms and intoxicating perfumes leaving him lightheaded.

Now, Xiahou Lian walked from the brothel district in the south to a cosmetics shop in the east, then to a mortuary in the west, questioning each agent along the way. As he expected, none had seen the Garuda. Finally, he found the room she'd stayed in. The innkeeper said she'd paid for three months but only stayed for half that time. Instead of leaving the room empty for her, they'd given it to another guest.

Certain that she hadn't brought a sheath this time either, the frustrated Xiahou Lian kicked the wall. If she hadn't requested specifically that the Garden assign her a sheath, no such order would've been sent to this location. And since she avoided the dens, Liuzhou's agents naturally had no clue where she was.

Maybe she'd already left the city, and they'd simply missed each other. Xiahou Lian wandered the streets, carrying his bag. By noon, the

avenues were bustling, vendors shuttling their wares back and forth as they shouted. Manure-cart drivers dumped their loads into the river by the bucketful, the rushing water carrying the filth away. People jostled shoulder to shoulder—some with children, some with wives, some adorned with gold or silver, and some barefoot.

Xiahou Lian eventually arrived at the north market. This was the liveliest spot in Liuzhou. Food vendors sold buns and steamed bread in the mornings, then rice noodles and soup in the afternoons. Others lined peculiar trinkets up on display. Ahead, a crowd had gathered; they whispered and pointed at something. When Xiahou Lian looked, he saw a foul-smelling corpse buzzing with flies, its flesh rotted and crawling with yellow and white maggots. He quickly walked away, too disgusted even to eat.

That afternoon, Xiahou Lian visited Jingdao Villa to investigate. Everything appeared normal—two fierce-looking guards stood watch at the gate, and there were no white funeral banners or signs of mourning. His heart sank. When he asked the townsfolk whether anything unusual had happened at the residence, they fell silent, as though even speaking of the place might cost their lives.

There was no doubt about it—Xiahou Pei had failed. But where had she gone? Maybe she was injured and unable to travel, forced into hiding. Xiahou Lian's concern grew. When he went by the corpse again, he'd learned his lesson; he covered his nose and quickly walked past.

If she was injured, why hadn't she gone to a den to recuperate? If she wasn't injured, she must have left already, likely just missing him. Perhaps she was already back at the Garden, sleeping soundly in their home. Xiahou

Lian headed to the relay station and sent a letter to the Garden's village at the foot of the mountain asking whether anyone had seen Xiahou Pei return.

As the sun set, its rich golden light spilled over the stone-paved roads, glazing the moss in a shimmering glow. Xiahou Lian had been walking all day; his legs ached, and his feet were ready to give out. Sitting down on a random step, he pulled out his canteen and took a sip. He was at the entrance to the north market, quiet now that the evening crowds were gone. Only a few solitary stalls remained. A tanghulu some child had dropped lay on the ground, rolling gently in the breeze.

The corpse was finally alone. It lay in the middle of the street, ragged and disheveled. Xiahou Lian felt a pang of pity for it. The body was headless, its left arm severed, and a rope was wrapped around the stump of its neck. The head, he saw, had rolled to the side—Xiahou Lian was sure it hadn't been there before, so someone must've kicked it. Now it lay facing him, its empty eye sockets staring in his direction.

Golden sunset washed over the street, bathing the corpse in a thin sheen of gold. Xiahou Lian stared silently, a sudden chill spreading across his face. He touched his cheek and realized he was crying.

As if pulled by some unseen force, he rose and walked slowly to the corpse, step by step. The head remained still, but Xiahou Lian felt the weight of its empty eye sockets on him, watching him approach until he finally stopped at the corpse's side.

Xiahou Lian brushed aside the filthy braids covering the victim's face. The features were mangled, slashed repeatedly by a blade. Who could have harbored such hatred? Someone had thrown the corpse into the marketplace for public humiliation—so why destroy its face? The body was

riddled with blade wounds, its shoulders and back hacked nearly to shreds and its bones shattered into fragments. Fat maggots wriggled from the decaying flesh and crept over Xiahou Lian's fingertips.

Who was this?

Xiahou Lian was scared. He wanted to stand up straight and leave but felt as if an invisible hand pressed down on his shoulder, rooting him in place. A moment later, his gaze fell on the tattered hem of the corpse's garments. It was the most ordinary, coarse clothing. The hems of the black fabric had been clumsily finished with uneven stitches and loose threads sticking out. The tailor clearly hadn't been too skilled.

As Xiahou Lian caught sight of that hem, his mind went completely blank. All hearing and sight left him. The world around him dissolved, leaving only that thin piece of fabric in focus.

He'd sewn that hem himself.

Xiahou Pei couldn't sew. Whenever she tried, she'd fix one hole only to create another. Xiahou Lian had picked up the needle himself out of necessity, learning to stitch, cut patterns, and even embroider. He'd made the garment before him last autumn after Xiahou Pei complained that her old clothes were torn. She'd shamelessly insisted that he make her something new, claiming that only the clothes her son sewed felt right.

It had to be a trick. He had to be mistaken—how could clothes he'd made have ended up on some stranger? His mother was surely still somewhere else, waiting for him to find her. *She has to be. She just has to be!*

Xiahou Lian clamped a hand over his mouth, trying to stifle the sobs rising in his throat. But tears kept coming, streaming down his cheeks and

onto his hands, scalding his fingers like searing brands.

Suddenly, he recognized her. Though her face was disfigured beyond recognition, the body still bore traces of Xiahou Pei. This grotesque corpse was his mother.

Silent grief pressed his shoulders like iron, despair flooding his veins. He wanted to scream, to roar, but when he opened his mouth, only strangled sobs escaped. Trembling, he cradled Xiahou Pei's body in his arms. She was light as a cloud; the faintest touch was likely to destroy her. She really had been destroyed—beneath her decaying flesh, not a bone remained unshattered.

Xiahou Lian's mind was in turmoil. There was Xiahou Pei, snatching his roasted sweet potato when he was a child; her dark, slender silhouette in the rain outside the Lu residence; her wild laughter as she swung her blade. Then all those vivid images faded, leaving only her muddy, decaying corpse and oppressive silence. Sharp, searing pain tore through his heart like his chest was being ripped open, unending flames surging within. Xiahou Lian collapsed to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

Heavy footsteps resounded from the end of the street, shaking the ground beneath him. Xiahou Lian raised his eyes to see a hawklike man astride a horse. He led a vast tide of disciples, each carrying a three-foot katana saber and marching in perfect tandem—left foot, right foot—like a disciplined army.

That was him! His mother's killer!

Xiahou Lian gently placed Xiahou Pei's body on the ground, unsheathed his saber, and let out a hoarse howl.

At that moment, he was a lone wolf driven into a corner, an orphaned cub baring its sharpest fangs at the enemy. His breath rattled, his lungs straining like broken bellows. His coldly gleaming blade reflected his glaring, bloodshot eyes.

Kill him! Kill him! Kill him! That maddening thought burned like fire in his mind, a deep fury coursing through his veins like an unleashed dragon. Xiahou Lian raised his saber, ready to charge and claim his revenge.

But just as he took his first step forward, a sharp blow landed on the back of his neck. All the strength in his body vanished at once, and he crumpled to the ground.

Xiahou Lian’s eyes stayed wide open, locked onto that man: his gray-streaked hair and beard, and the face that looked as though it had been carved by a blade. But Xiahou Lian couldn’t stop his strength from slipping away; even his eyelids grew as heavy as lead. At last, his eyes reluctantly closed, and the world plunged into darkness.

Chapter 37:
No Soul to Return

WHEN XIAHOU LIAN WOKE, he lay still for a moment, dazed. He felt as though he was waking from a terrible nightmare in which his mother was dead, her body left in the street to rot—decapitated, face unrecognizable. Slowly, with unbearable anguish, he realized it hadn't been a dream at all.

She must still be lying there. I have to go back for her!

But as soon as he opened the door to leave the room, Uncle Duan pushed him back in, Qiu Ye entering after him.

"Uncle, what're you doing? My mother—"

"I know!" Uncle Duan cut him off. "Hurry and pack your things. You're coming back to the Garden with us."

"What about my mother? I need to get her!" Xiahou Lian shouted with tears in his eyes.

"You brat! Liu Guicang's disciples are searching every house in the city for you! If you go looking for the Garuda now, they'll catch you before you even get close. Are you trying to get yourself killed? Stop causing trouble and pack your things. We're leaving!"

Xiahou Lian stood silently, fists clenched so tightly that his nails dug into his palms.

Qiu Ye sighed, his eyes filled with a desolation reminiscent of fallen leaves scattered by a cold wind. He stood by the window, peering through the flimsy curtains as Liu Guicang's disciples roamed the streets, sabers in

hand. Xiahou Pei's body lay motionless in the middle of the street, her hollow eye sockets gazing into the starless sky.

"I'm not leaving," Xiahou Lian said.

"Xiahou Lian!"

"I'm not leaving!" Xiahou Lian raised his bloodshot eyes. "I need to bury my mother. And I need to kill Liu Guicang!"

Uncle Duan laughed angrily. "Do you even know who Liu Guicang is? If your mother couldn't defeat him, what makes you think *you* can? How do you plan to fight hundreds of his disciples? How will you withstand his katana saber? When you fail, you'll end up just like her—dead in the streets, a laughingstock! Perfect. You and your mother can lie there in the markets, one in the north and the other in the south. That'll be a fine show for everyone!"

Qiu Ye frowned. "Duan Jiu!" he said sharply.

"But I can't just leave her lying there—I just can't!" Xiahou Lian said, wiping his eyes. The image of Xiahou Pei's decaying body haunted him. She had been so proud and unyielding. How could she endure lying exposed to the sun and wind, being eaten by insects and rats? How much was she suffering?

"Xiao-Lian," Qiu Ye said. "Do you know why Xiahou Pei's face was disfigured?"

Xiahou Lian turned his reddened eyes to Qiu Ye.

"She didn't want you to recognize her. She didn't want you to seek revenge. The Garuda was the Garden's finest blade, and she never feared a sword, nor death. She lived boldly and did as she pleased, harboring no

attachments—except to you. Xiao-Lian, you were her one and only tie to this world."

"She didn't want me to recognize her—didn't want me to save or avenge her. But how could I… How could I…" Xiahou Lian choked on his sobs. "Am I supposed to stand back and watch her be trampled?!"

"No, Xiao-Lian. But she didn't want you to throw your life away. She wanted you to live. To survive, no matter what."

Grief piled on like layer after layer of dust, smothering Xiahou Lian's heart. What was so great about living? What was so terrible about dying? Was he meant to let his mother's body rot in the streets while he ate and drank as if nothing had happened? Without another word, he picked up his saber, pushed open the door, and walked out of the room.

Downstairs, one table was filled with agents, another with assassins. Qiu Ye and Duan Jiu weren't the only ones who'd shown up—the rest of the Garden's Eight Legions had come as well. The moment Xiahou Lian stepped out, eleven pairs of eyes fell on him. Everyone was silent, as still and expressionless as statues.

Xiahou Lian pursed his lips and descended the stairs. Suddenly, an arrow grazed his side, drawing a stream of blood.

He turned his head to see Duan Jiu, his face livid. "Xiahou Lian! Are you going to fight Liu Guicang with those injuries?"

Xiahou Lian didn't answer; he kept walking.

A second arrow struck the back of his knee, sending him crashing to the ground. Gritting his teeth, he clutched the railing and hauled himself upright again, the veins on his hands bulging like ropes. Dragging his

injured leg, he limped down the stairs. The assassins watched in silence, their expressions unreadable—maybe pitying, maybe sympathetic.

Duan Jiu shot a third arrow. Xiahou Lian crumpled once more, tumbling down the stairs. Blood poured from his head, his face battered and swollen. He could no longer stand on his trembling legs, but he still tried to crawl, leaving twin trails of blood in his wake. He was going to his death. Everyone knew it.

But some things had to be done without hesitation, even if doing them meant certain doom.

Qiu Ye, who had been silent, finally spoke. “Xiao-Lian, don’t you understand? You’re just an ant.”

Descending the stairs, Qiu Ye seized Xiahou Lian by the collar with one hand. He had always been a delicate man, resembling a scholar who lacked the strength to lift a sword, but he now lifted seventeen-year-old Xiahou Lian effortlessly. Pressing Xiahou Lian’s face against the window, he forced the youth to look at the disciples marching past outside.

“Look! Those disciples rise at dawn and rest at night. Their katana sabers are unmatched. Their quick-draw technique splits your belly and spills your intestines like water. Their upward slash crushes your skull until your left eye meets your right.” Qiu Ye spoke in a gentle, composed tone even as he painted the most brutal of images.

Tears silently streamed down Xiahou Lian’s face.

“Do you think dying for your mother would fulfill your filial duty, so you’d have no regrets when you faced your mother in the afterlife?” Qiu Ye asked. “Well, you’re wrong. If you die, the world will know that Liu Guicang killed the Garuda *and* her son. He’ll be hailed as the world’s

undisputed foremost sword master. People will flock to him and his order, and he'll rule the jianghu completely unchallenged. And you? You and your mother will have been nothing but his stepping stones, a crowning achievement on his list of triumphs, two pathetic rats slain by the master of Jingdao Villa." Qiu Ye's calm voice echoed in Xiahou Lian's ears. "Would you be happy with that, Xiao-Lian?"

Xiahou Lian hung lifelessly as Qiu Ye held him by the neck. Tears blurred his vision, making everything hazy. Shame, hatred, and sorrow raged within him, leaving him battered and broken. What tormented him most was his helplessness—his crushing sense of powerlessness. He would have no choice but to hide like a coward.

Outside, Liu Guicang rode up on his horse, its hooves clip-clopping as he circled Xiahou Pei's body twice.

Qiu Ye's grip on Xiahou Lian tightened; his gaze remained fixed on the scene outside. The assassins gathered silently, carefully poking small holes in the window paper to peer out at the street.

"You're Xiahou Lian, aren't you?" Liu Guicang shouted. "I know you're the Garuda's son."

Xiahou Lian trembled imperceptibly. Qiu Ye held him steady, not letting him move.

"Coward," Liu Guicang sneered, his eyes on Xiahou Pei's lifeless body. "Your own mother lies right here, and yet you hide away like a scared little turtle. What's the matter? To think that the Garuda's son is a coward who doesn't even have the guts to face me!"

The night was dark as ink, heavy and suffocating, as though it might spill from the sky at any moment. Houses lined the streets on both sides. In

the dark night, frightened eyes watched Liu Guicang from behind the window paper. Sitting astride his tall horse, the swordsman scanned the street, but the person he sought was nowhere to be found. He waved his hand, and one of his disciples whistled.

From the end of the street came the fierce barking of dogs. One tall shadow and two shorter ones emerged from the dense darkness—an advancing disciple leading two black wolfhounds. The dogs prowled and sniffed; their sleek coats shone, their eyes gleamed with hunger, and drool dripped from their teeth.

Xiahou Lian shivered.

“You gutter vermin have no sense of family,” Liu Guicang said. “Xiahou Lian, if I let the dogs devour your mother until nothing’s left, will you still stay hidden?”

It felt as if a thunderbolt had struck Xiahou Lian’s skull. His body shook violently as rage surged through his chest. He thrashed, trying to break free, but Qiu Ye’s grip was unyielding. The other assassins rushed forward; some seized his legs, others pinned his arms, and even more covered his mouth. His veins bulged, his teeth grinding audibly. Fury and humiliation tore through him like lightning, threatening to burn him to ashes.

But there was nothing he could do. He could only watch helplessly as the dogs sniffed at his mother’s corpse. The disciple raised a whip and lashed it hard against the wolfhounds. They yelped in fear, then sank their teeth into Xiahou Pei’s battered body, beginning to tear it apart.

They ripped away chunks of rotting flesh and swallowed them, quickly exposing the stark white bones beneath.

Xiahou Lian's tears poured down in streams. The assassins turned away, one letting out a quiet sigh.

"Stop being so impulsive," said the assassin holding his arm. Xiahou Lian recognized him as the newly appointed Mahoraga. "Do you really not understand why Xiahou Pei died?"

Xiahou Lian froze.

"It was because of you," an assassin below him murmured. "If you hadn't let that young master escape back then, Xiahou Pei wouldn't have had to take your lashes for you. She wouldn't have suffered new injuries atop old ones, so that they plagued her for years. Her injuries flare up in the rain, and Liuzhou's winters are damp. The heavens took her, and there was nothing anyone could do."

Because of me. It's all because of me. The assassins' words echoed in Xiahou Lian's ears like a curse. His recklessness and defiance had caused Xiahou Pei's tragic end. It was all his fault.

Liu Guicang waited for a long time, but still no one appeared. He dismounted from his horse and set a foot on Xiahou Pei's head. "Xiahou Lian! You don't care that your mother's head will end up dog food? I'll count to ten—after that, her head is theirs!"

"Pull him back!" roared Uncle Duan. "Don't let him watch!"

The assassins dragged Xiahou Lian to the table and forced him onto the stool. He sat stiffly, a lifeless puppet, his eyes dull and hollow. Silent, unmoving, he seemed shrouded in a dark cloud. Even without him speaking, his suffocating grief was palpable to every assassin in the room.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven…"

Xiahou Lian didn’t move. He seemed deaf to Liu Guicang’s countdown, like a puppet oblivious to the world.

“…three, two, one!” Liu Guicang shouted. “Xiahou Lian, you useless trash!”

He lifted his foot, and the two dogs lunged at Xiahou Pei’s head, tearing at the rotting flesh. In moments, half her face was gone.

Xiahou Lian stood, and the assassins surrounded him. “I’m going to sleep,” he said, his voice hoarse and barely audible.

Trembling, he turned and climbed the stairs. With each step, he swayed on his injured legs. No one offered help: An assassin’s path had to be walked alone, even through thorns or down roads prowled by demons.

Behind him, outside the inn’s door, the two wolfhounds gnawed Xiahou Pei’s skull, even crushing the bone between their sharp teeth. The sound of their chewing seeped through the cracks in the door and windows, reaching Xiahou Lian’s ears. But Xiahou Lian didn’t look back. Step by step, he crawled like a stray dog back to his room.

The night was silent, devoid even of the baying of dogs. The entire city seemed lifeless.

Xiahou Lian sat by the bed, hugging his knees. His tears had run dry. Boys weren’t supposed to cry. When he was little, Xiahou Pei had scolded him for crying, calling him a crybaby, a sissy. Xiahou Lian hated those words. Every time he wanted to cry, he held back his tears, biting his fist to silence himself at any cost. But now, there was no one to care if he cried. He could weep from dusk until dawn, and no one would scold him for being a baby or acting like a girl.

Suddenly, the door opened, and Uncle Duan walked in. He offered Xiahou Lian a blade. Xiahou Lian took it—it was Hengbo. The cold of the sheath in his hand felt like a stab to his heart. He said nothing, just cradled Hengbo slowly over his chest.

“Luckily, I was able to recover Hengbo. I found it in the woods outside the city. So you’ll have something to remember her by,” Uncle Duan said. “Your mother was a natural-born swordswoman. For most, being an assassin means hardship. They have to struggle and crawl their way up, slowly making a name for themselves. Failure is inevitable. Folks like us have simple wishes: We do the jobs we can and fight to survive. But your mother was different—a genius. From the moment she debuted, she never failed, and she never lost. In the Central Plains, they called her the Garuda. In the Western Regions, they called her ‘Avoru’—‘devil.’”

Xiahou Lian remained silent, his eyes like empty wells. Uncle Duan wasn’t sure whether the young man was even listening, but he sighed and continued. “Xiao-Lian, you must remember this: Your father is Qiye Garden’s abbot, the unstoppable Shixin Buddha who swept through the Central Plains thirty years ago. Your mother was Qiye Garden’s Garuda, the Avoru of the Western Regions, the sharpest blade in the world. The blood of assassins flows in your veins. You are a born killer. Your brother, Chiyan, inherited Shixin’s swordplay. Go find him, Xiao-Lian. Learn the strongest saber techniques in the world from him.”

Xiahou Lian raised his head, his dark, lifeless eyes reflecting Uncle Duan’s face. In a hoarse voice, he repeated the name of the brother he’d never met. “Chiyan.”

“Right. He lives on Heimianfo Peak. Only the abbot knows the way there. You’ll have to climb the mountain yourself, using ropes, daggers,

whatever it takes. Find him, Xiao-Lian. You must take your mother's place and become the world's strongest assassin. It's the only hope you have of defeating Liu Guicang."

"I understand."

The grieving boy was hidden in the shadows. Uncle Duan couldn't see his eyes—only the frail hands clenched so tightly around Hengbo that it looked as though his fingers might snap under the strain. In that moment, Uncle Duan felt that the boy's hands gripped not just a saber but his very life.

The assassins began planning their exit from Liuzhou. They decided to leave in groups, with Xiahou Lian in the first, and departed on a clear day. Qiu Ye, Duan Jiu, and Xiahou Lian rode from the city on horseback. Ahead stretched vast plains dotted with withered trees and cawing crows, stone bridges and winding roads. Faint clouds overhead brushed the sky like strokes of pale ink, and the darker hues below seemed to paint the outline of the boundless expanse of distant mountains.

About half a mile outside the city, Xiahou Lian suddenly reined in his horse. Qiu Ye and Duan Jiu turned to look at him in surprise.

Xiahou Lian had barely said anything for days. Worried that he might do something rash, Qiu Ye had assigned people to watch over him in shifts. Yet Xiahou Lian did nothing: He ate when it was time, slept when he was told, and never went near the main gate. He was still just a child, and no one expected him to recover so soon from his mother's death. He no longer cried, though, and his absolute obedience bordered on chilling.

"What are you doing?" Uncle Duan asked.

Xiahou Lian dismounted without answering and knelt by the roadside. Then he prostrated three times toward Liuzhou, pressing his head to the ground.

“Unfilial son Xiahou Lian bids farewell to his mother! The grudge born from her murder cannot be erased. From this day forward, Xiahou Lian will feud unendingly with Jingdao Villa and Liu Guicang,” he declared. “I won’t rest until I die!”

Qiu Ye walked over to him. “Xiao-Lian, don’t you know that those who kill will be killed in return? Our hands are stained with blood and heavy with sins. Such a day is bound to come. Why cling to this obsession? Listen to me: Let it go. Live your own life! An eye for an eye leads only to an endless cycle. If you kill Liu Guicang, his disciples and descendants will come after you. Why do this to yourself?”

“Shifu,” Xiahou Lian said without turning around, his kneeling figure cold and bleak. “I, Xiahou Lian, will not marry, have children, take disciples, or make friends in this lifetime. All such responsibilities will end with me. Once I’m gone, everything will come to an end.”

The wind whispered desolately through the withered grass of the winter plains. Xiahou Lian’s words were both a vow and a self-inflicted punishment.

Qiu Ye watched as Xiahou Lian rose and walked away from him. The biting cold wind tore through the boy’s hair, whipping his tattered black robes. Hatred and grief had suddenly hardened this wild, untamed child, forcing him to mature. When Xiahou Lian lifted his gaze, a sharp ache pierced Qiu Ye’s heart.

Those eyes belonged to a wounded lone wolf.

Qiu Ye knew that once the wolf had healed, it would return from afar armed with claws and teeth, ready to exact vengeance on all who’d trampled that assassin’s body.

Chapter 38:
Returning Once More

IN THE DEPTHS OF WINTER, heavy snow fell, encasing the Forbidden City in ice. The sharp wind sliced like a blade, biting through the collar of anyone brave enough to step outdoors.

Consort Li sat before a plum-patterned mirror, studying her reflection. Women seemed to age more quickly after childbirth; in a few short years, faint lines had appeared at the corners of her eyes. They were like stubborn creases on fine silk, impossible to smooth. The sight stirred a quiet frustration.

Her personal maid, Zhuxia, hurried over and whispered in her ear. “Depot Chief Shen is here.”

Consort Li looked to one side and saw the heavy doors creak open, allowing a sliver of daylight to spill in. A tall man entered, cloaked in snow, followed by a line of young eunuchs bearing wooden trays.

This was the most sought-after man in the Forbidden City, second only to Wei De. As chief of the Eastern Depot, he moved through the palace with an entourage as grand and imposing as the mountains and seas. He was also exceptionally handsome, with porcelain-like skin and features seemingly painted in ink. His eyes always had a faint hint of a smile at the corners, though that smile never quite reached their depths.

“Go and fetch the second prince,” Consort Li instructed.

Shen Jue approached her. “Your Highness,” he said, deftly taking Consort Li’s hand and leading her toward a screen. “These are the new

tributary furs. Her Majesty the Empress has already made her choice. Please pick one you like, and I'll have someone tailor it into a scarf. It's bitterly cold, and Your Highness must take care of your health." His words were always as warm and comforting as a spring breeze.

Consort Li swept a brief glance over the offerings—black fox and silver mink, the same as last year. The empress had no doubt already claimed the finest silver-tipped otter fur. What was left for her to choose? Pointing at a random pelt, she asked, "Does a minor issue like this really require the depot chief himself to burden himself with stepping in? What are your subordinates doing?" Sitting on her throne, she gazed up at Shen Jue, the crimson tassels of her headdress framing her flawless, jade-like chin.

Ah—why was a man so beautiful? It was truly maddening.

"Your Highness jests. It's an honor to serve you; others would beg for the privilege. How could I find it burdensome?" He glanced at the fur she'd chosen and smiled faintly. "Your Highness chose the silver mink, but your servant finds its color a bit too frivolous. I think the black sable is far more refined—it suits Your Highness much better."

As always, his words were full of reason. For years, he'd subtly guided her choices in attire, speech, and behavior. In turn, without realizing it, she developed a reputation for elegance, propriety, and virtue—so much so that even the most critical scholars spoke of her with unqualified praise.

Given her typical style, the sable was undeniably the most suitable choice. Yet today, she felt a flicker of doubt. She shot a resentful glance at Shen Jue, wondering whether he thought a bright mink fur would no longer suit her aging appearance.

Consort Li nodded, and Shen Jue gave the order. The line of young eunuchs left the room with their trays.

Only after the doors were securely closed did she let herself relax, slumping into her throne like softened clay. Shen Jue gave no sign that he noticed; his eyebrows didn't so much as twitch.

No one knew that Consort Li was merely a paper tiger. Shen Jue had crafted all of her titles—"Virtuous Consort," "Gentle and Quiet." Her perceived meekness and humility were rooted not in virtue but in timidity and fear. Even her amiable smile was nothing more than awkwardness.

"After all my waiting, you finally came, Depot Chief. Ah—you're always so busy. I was afraid that sending someone to fetch you might draw Wei De's attention, so I had no choice but to hold back and wait for you to find time to visit."

"There's no need for concern, Your Highness. If you have any worries, please feel free to speak openly."

"Did you know that the emperor visited me the other day?"

Shen Jue's eyes curved as he smiled. "That's good news indeed. But Your Highness seems worried, rather than pleased. Why?"

"Good news? Hardly!" Consort Li flung her handkerchief onto the table in frustration. "As soon as His Majesty left, the empress came over for tea and said all sorts of cryptic things. I smiled and nodded so much that my face nearly went stiff. I don't know what got into His Majesty when he insisted on staying in my quarters, but now the empress thinks I pulled some trick to win back his favor. She's probably cursing me at this very moment!"

Shen Jue hid a faint smile, lowering his head. “When His Majesty is here, Your Highness should focus on serving him well—it’s your rightful duty, and even the empress can’t fault you for it. Remember, lying low doesn’t mean constant compromise or letting others think you’re weak—it’s about avoiding confrontation and conserving your strength. Your Highness should simply remain composed and act with decorum, leaving the empress no reason to pick a fight. His Majesty’s visit was a good thing—it showed the empress that you still hold a place in his heart, so she won’t dare to move against you recklessly.”

“Is that so?” Consort Li let out a sigh of relief, slumping back into her seat. “Serving as a noble consort is exhausting. I’m constantly worried that the empress will hold more offenses against me. I’ve been so on edge these past few days, too afraid to eat or drink. I even have Zhuxia inspect the incense in my room repeatedly each day.”

“Your Highness is like someone who, having been bitten by a snake, flinches at the sight of a rope. There’s no need for concern. With me here, nothing impure will enter Chengqian Palace. If such matters still required your attention, I would have myself caned.”

Consort Li smiled, the dark clouds in her heart finally dissipating. “Then I leave it to you, Depot Chief.”

Right after she finished speaking, Zhuxia entered, the second prince in her arms. The child was as delicate as a jade sculpture, his cheeks rosy like a plump doll in a New Year’s painting. Wrapped snugly against the cold, he resembled a little snowball. Zhuxia brought him closer, and the spirited child beamed at Shen Jue, reaching out eagerly to be held.

Consort Li smiled warmly as she placed the child in Shen Jue's arms. "Depot Chief, look at this child. Even at such a young age, he can tell who truly cares for him. See how fond he is of you! He treats you with as much warmth as if you were his second father. We, mother and son, are alone in this vast palace with no one to rely on but you, Depot Chief. We hope you'll keep looking after us."

The dim lamplight flickered, casting shadows over Shen Jue's downcast eyes. Consort Li caught the faintest curl of a smile at the corners of his lips—but it was too shallow, too cold. Shen Jue held the second prince with care, the child's soft hand resting in his own, as light as a tuft of cotton. "Your Highness is a noble woman with boundless prospects. I'm merely a humble servant. How could I ever dare call myself his second father? Please, Your Highness, don't say such things again."

Consort Li murmured quietly in agreement.

Relinquishing the second prince, Shen Jue accepted a cloak from a young eunuch, secured its gilded clasp, and bowed slightly to Consort Li before striding out into the swirling snowstorm. Consort Li watched from afar as he stepped through the palace gates, then heaved a soft sigh.

"What did he even mean by that?!" Zhuxia pouted. "Is our second prince not good enough for him? Really."

"A man's heart is as elusive as a needle lost in the ocean," Consort Li said wistfully. "Especially the heart of such a beautiful man."

Zhuxia clicked her tongue. "True, there's nothing to complain about when it comes to his appearance."

Consort Li looked at her askance. "You silly girl! Don't tell me you've fallen for him?"

Zhuxia’s face reddened as she quickly protested, “What are you saying, Your Highness?! Even if Your Highness has no shame, your servant does!”

Consort Li giggled and tickled the maid under the arms. “If you marry him, we’ll become a family. Then he’ll have no choice but to assist us further!”

Outside, the snowstorm raged on. Shen Jue sat in his carriage, his hands cradling a heater, and closed his eyes to try and rest. Lately, peace was a luxury he couldn’t afford. He found himself darting around constantly—tending to Consort Li, handling Wei De, and navigating the emperor’s demands. Below, a throng of scheming officials had lined up to speak to him, and he couldn’t just turn them all away.

Shen Jue frowned as he lifted the curtain to gaze at the snow outside. Thick flakes coated the ground, and the distant mountains stood crowned in white. As Shen Jue leaned against the carriage wall, his mind wandered back to his days at the Xie residence, when he and Xiahou Lian had been punished and forced to kneel in the cold. He recalled how Xiahou Lian had carried him back to Qiuwu Courtyard afterward—that day had also been full of swirling snow.

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review had invited Shen Jue over for a casual lunch. At the dining table, spittle flew everywhere as the portly man rambled on about patriotism, world unity, and other such lofty ideals. He also heaped praise on Shen Jue, calling him a pillar of the nation, a peerless official. The meal was tasteless, and Shen Jue listened with a blank expression, letting the words flow in one ear and out the other.

When the lunch finally ended, Shen Jue declined the man's invitations to dinner and future meetings. He gestured for Shen Wenxing, who was standing by, to follow him out. The minister of the Court of Judicial Review hurried after them, his back hunched as he snatched the umbrella from Shen Wenxing's hand in order to hold it for Shen Jue. Shen Jue subtly stepped away, leaving his outer shoulder exposed to the snow. Soon, he was half dusted in white.

As they reached the courtyard, Shen Jue prepared to politely ask the minister not to escort him farther. Then a disheveled girl burst through a side gate and rushed toward the main entrance. Everyone was startled, and several servants stepped forward to stop her. When she spotted Shen Jue, she froze in her tracks, then dropped to her knees and threw herself at his feet.

"Your Excellency, save me! Save me!"

The minister's face darkened. "Who is this? Take her away! Don't let her disturb the depot chief!" he barked at the servants.

Several servants stepped forward to seize the girl, but she clung desperately to Shen Jue's leg, sobbing. "My name is Zhu Mingyue. My fiancé, Situ Jin, is a captain in the Five Armies Camp. Earlier today, the eldest son of the minister of the Court of Judicial Review abducted me and brought me here! My fiancé is stationed at the military camp just outside the capital. I beg you, Depot Chief, please! Please save me!"

Shen Wenxing was horrified. Shen Jue's fastidiousness was well known—he never let anyone come too close. The young eunuchs who served him bathed three times a day, and they dared not approach him if

they so much as broke a sweat. Now, this girl had grabbed Shen Jue's leg! Shen Wenxing was certain Shen Jue would take off her head.

The minister's eldest son hurried over, pale at the sight of Mingyue clinging to Shen Jue. "Please don't listen to her nonsense, Depot Chief. She's just a madwoman—the daughter of one of my servants. They failed to watch her today, and now she's ended up bothering you. I'll take care of this immediately. Someone come drag her away!"

Mingyue panicked and shook her head. "He's lying! He's lying! He took advantage of my father's death and the fact that my fiancé is stationed at the military camp to abduct me and bring me here! Depot Chief, you're good and just—please help me! I beg you!"

This would be her only chance. She'd finally escaped the woodshed. The mansion was heavily guarded, but she was only steps away from the gate. As long as Shen Jue helped her, she could escape. She looked up hopefully, only to be met with a cold, indifferent man's icy gaze.

"You dirtied my shoes," Shen Jue said.

Mingyue felt as though he'd dumped a bucket of icy water over her, chilling her from head to toe. She loosened her grip, numb.

His brow deeply furrowed, Shen Jue stepped into the waiting carriage; meanwhile, the minister's elated eldest son gestured to the servants. They seized Mingyue's legs and began dragging her back toward the inner courtyard. Mingyue thrashed and wailed, clawing at the ground until her nails broke. Her hands left ten trails of dark-red blood in the snow.

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SITU JIN STROLLED ALONG the street. It was Mingyue's birthday, and he'd requested leave a month in advance to ensure he would be free. He'd also saved three months' wages to purchase a gilded hairpin from Liulichang. The hairpin, originally from the palace, was to be his betrothal gift. The matchmaker was ready; today was the day Situ Jin planned to propose to Mingyue.

Following the second prince's birth, the emperor had proclaimed a general amnesty, and Situ Jin was pardoned and reinstated. Still, for Mingyue, the past few years had been nothing short of a nightmare. Shortly after Situ Jin's departure three years earlier, her father had passed away, leaving her to fend for herself in the capital. She managed to survive by foraging herbs in the countryside to sell to local apothecaries, supplementing her meager income with rough needlework.

A stunning woman, she was widely known as the "Xi Shi[5] of Herbs," and often drew unwanted attention from ruffians who came knocking on her door in the dead of night. Mingyue lived in constant dread; she barricaded her doors with tables, chairs, and anything else within reach. She even stacked chests and crates against the door of her room, sealing it securely. Matchmakers came by frequently and urged her to marry, but she always declined, saying that she was still in mourning. Yet everyone knew the truth —she was waiting for a man who might never return.

Situ Jin still recalled the day he'd gotten back. Mingyue was standing in the doorway, a basket of herbs strapped to her back, silently watching him from a distance. As he drew closer, tears spilled down her face. She'd grown so thin that her already delicate face was sharp and angular, almost pointed.

“Lord Situ, my father is gone,” Mingyue had cried. “My father is gone. I’m all alone.”

Situ Jin, who was terrible with words, took a long, awkward pause before finally managing, “That’s fine. I’m by myself too. But if we’re together, two ‘me’s will make an ‘us.’”

Mingyue wiped her tears with the back of her hand, still weeping, then suddenly sputtered a giggle.

The truth was, Situ Jin had wanted to say more. He wanted to say that, if she was willing, they could be more than just two; their family could grow to three, four, even five in the future.

Earlier that year, Mingyue had at last completed her mourning period. Situ Jin had been preparing for that moment for a long time. With no family of his own, he took care of all the arrangements himself: finding a matchmaker, calculating the best dates, and preparing betrothal gifts. His priority was to give Mingyue the very best he could provide.

The winter sun was pleasantly warm, snow glistening on the ground. A pear tree bloomed at the alley’s entrance, the white petals drifting gently in the wind to blend seamlessly with the snow. For once, Situ Jin’s normally expressionless face radiated a trace of cheer, prompting several passersby to turn and stare.

As he turned the corner, he saw the matchmaker pacing anxiously at the door.

“Oh, Lord Situ, you’re finally here!” The matchmaker rushed over, her face full of worry. “The son of the minister of the Court of Judicial Review has kidnapped Miss Mingyue! You must do something!”

Situ Jin felt as if a thunderbolt had struck him, numbing his scalp. His vision flickered, winking with stars as he steadied himself against the wall. “When did this happen?”

“Noon. It’s been almost two hours!”

Situ Jin said nothing more. He pressed his lips together and returned home to grab a saber from the altar. He’d obtained the blade during his apprenticeship to a blacksmith on the northern frontier. It was long and slightly curved like a crescent moon—a hallmark of northern craftsmanship.

The matchmaker had followed on his heels, and as she watched him draw the blade, her face paled with alarm. “What are you thinking? You can’t fight him head-on! You’d be outnumbered—and you’ll just end up under arrest by the authorities!”

“There’s no other way. If I don’t go now, it’ll be too late.” He dared not say that it might *already* be too late.

His face grim, he marched toward the residence of the minister of the Court of Judicial Review, saber in hand. He radiated murderous rage. Watching Situ Jin’s resolute figure fade into the distance, the matchmaker sighed deeply and stomped in frustration—but ultimately didn’t follow.

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SHEN WENXING HELPED Shen Jue into the carriage, then hurried back, waving his horsetail whisk. “Wait, wait!”

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review quickly approached. “Did the depot chief still need to say something?”

“The depot chief said that the woman dirtied his boots and cannot be forgiven. She must be taken to the Eastern Depot and kept there until she cleans them.”

“That’s…” The eldest son managed a strained smile. “Why don’t I present the depot chief with a pair from Xingyun Pavilion? The most comfortable boots you can find!”

Shen Wenxing looked at him askance, snorting. “Does our depot chief lack shoes?” he sneered. “This woman offended him, and you still try to shield her?”

“No, no!” The minister glared at his son, then pointed at his servants and snapped, “Let go of her! Quickly!”

The servants hesitated, but they finally let go. Mingyue kicked free and scrambled to Shen Wenxing’s side. Her once-delicate hands were bloodstained, and her almond-shaped eyes brimmed with tears.

She really was a beauty, Shen Wenxing noted. No wonder his godfather wanted to save her.

In the years following Shen Jue’s rise to power, many had offered him beautiful women. Some even sent over young men. Shen Jue showed no interest, however, and turned them all away. Over time, people came to the conclusion that, since he was still a eunuch—and thus missing a certain piece—such gestures only rubbed salt in the wound. From then on, the offers quietly ceased.

Shen Wenxing had thought that Shen Jue simply had no interest in such things, but now it seemed more likely that he’d just never met the right

person. Giving Mingyue a reassuring smile, Shen Wenxing led her to the carriage.

Mingyue wiped her tears. “Thank you for saving me, Depot Chief.”

There was no reply from within the carriage besides Shen Jue tossing a cloak out.

Picking up the cloak, Shen Wenxing muttered to himself about how stubborn the depot chief could be, making even the simple rescue of a maiden into something that seemed begrudgingly coerced. Handing the cloak to Mingyue, he said, “There are no women’s garments in the carriage, so I’m afraid you’ll have to make do with a cloak for now.”

“Thank you, Depot Chief! Thank you, Your Excellency,” Mingyue called, tears in her eyes. “You’re truly kindhearted!”

Shen Wenxing smiled. “Remember that, miss. Once we return, be sure to serve the depot chief well.”

Mingyue was stunned. “What…what do you mean?”

“What else could I mean? Our chief doesn’t save people for free.”

Just as he finished speaking, a shoe flew out of the carriage window and struck Shen Wenxing squarely on the forehead. Startled and terrified, Shen Wenxing raised his head to meet Shen Jue’s icy gaze.

“Your name already has one mouth. Perhaps I should remove the one on your face.”[6]

“Spare me, Godfather!” Shen Wenxing covered his mouth.

Mingyue and Shen Wenxing followed the carriage as it rolled through the bustling streets of Andingmen. Mingyue pulled the cloak tightly around

herself. Her hair was tangled, and her clothes were filthy—she couldn't bear the thought of being seen like this.

As they reached Haizi Bridge, a man approached, radiating bloodthirstiness. Mingyue's heart skipped a beat. "Lord Situ!" she called out.

Situ Jin looked up and saw the girl he loved running toward him, wrapped in a cloak. Behind her was an unassuming carriage, a slick-looking eunuch with a smiling face standing beside it.

"The man in that carriage is the chief of the Eastern Depot," Mingyue whispered to her fiancé. "He saved me."

Situ Jin approached the carriage and bowed. "Situ Jin, at your service. Thank you for saving her, Depot Chief. If you ever need anything, just say the word. I'll do whatever it takes, no matter the cost."

A hand lifted the carriage curtain, and Situ Jin heard a cold voice.

"Situ Jin—the top scorer in the imperial military exams in the eighteenth year of Xuanhe. You're renowned for your ability to shoot with both hands, and to strike any target within a hundred paces. The emperor awarded you a golden bow, and you served in the right-hand army of the imperial guard. But three years later, during Qiye Garden's assassination of the late noble consort, you abandoned your post and were demoted to the Five Armies Camp. Afterward, you shot the first prince's horse, causing him to fall and permanently injure his leg. You were sentenced to a hundred lashes and exiled thousands of miles away, but you were eventually pardoned and reinstated. Still, after six years in office, you remain a mere captain."

Situ Jin lowered his head in silence.

“Raise your head.”

Situ Jin did as he was told and saw a familiar face in the carriage. Years ago, Shen Jue had been a young eunuch caught on the cusp between boyhood and adolescence, but now a refined and elegant young man sat there.

“I owe you my life,” Shen Jue said. “The Eastern Depot is currently short one company commander. If you’re interested, report to the Eastern Depot tomorrow.”

Chapter 39:
Planning Far Ahead

IN JINGDAO VILLA'S FENGLAI Water Pavilion, Liu Guicang sat cross-legged on the ground, a sleek, narrow-bladed saber resting across his knees. The curtains around him swayed gently in the breeze, like a veil of mist. Outside the pavilion, tall trees cast deep, lush shadows into the distance, where maids waited to be summoned.

The Fenglai Water Pavilion was Liu Guicang's masterpiece, built under his careful supervision. Every piece of yellow mountain stone had been transported from Anhui and arranged carefully into a rock garden that resembled a snow-covered cave, all under his watchful eye. Here, Liu Guicang hosted esteemed guests from across the land, listening to their voices as if savoring the refined melodies of Master Shi Kuang's "The Spring Snow."[7]

"Villa Master, the Nuchao Sect from the East Sea has come to present you with a manual on saber techniques!"

"The Tianyi Blade Sect from the Taihang Mountains has come to present a manual!"

"The Junzi Blade Sect from the West Lake has come to present a manual!"

Liu Guicang opened his eye, his gaze sweeping over his domain with pride and satisfaction, like the gaze of a lion surveying its territory. "Give orders to prepare a feast. Let our guests enjoy themselves before they depart!"

“Thank you, Villa Master!” The guests bowed in unison, then filed out of the pavilion.

Suddenly, the clear sound of applause echoed from beyond the curtains. Liu Guicang turned his head, narrowing his eyes when he spotted a black-cloaked figure seated to his right. The figure’s large hood concealed most of its features, leaving only a glimpse of bearded chin. The shadowy silhouette appeared and vanished as the layers of curtains that hid it swayed in the breeze.

“Congratulations, Villa Master Liu,” the figure said. “You’ve now gathered the entire land’s blade manuals at Jingdao Villa. You are truly the jianghu’s unrivaled ruler, a grandmaster among masters.”

“I dare not claim such a title.” Liu Guicang raised a wine cup languidly. “I still have quite a distance to go compared to your abbot.”

“He has long withdrawn from the world—he’s a forgotten relic of the past. How could he possibly compare to you?”

“You’re mistaken,” Liu Guicang said solemnly. “His preeminence is precisely why he disappeared. Nobody could challenge him anymore, and his reputation became unmatched. Thirty years ago, he cut someone down with every step he took—one step, one life; ten steps, ten lives. Blood flowed beneath his feet, as if bloody lotuses bloomed with each stride. I wasn’t there to witness it, but the elders’ tales make me feel as if I saw it with my own eyes!”

“That’s all in the past.”

“But he’s insurmountable, a legend!”

The black-clad figure chuckled softly. “So you’re after the life of our abbot, Villa Master Liu?”

“With you as my inside man, what do I have to fear?” Liu Guicang laughed. “Don’t you wish to become the next abbot, my friend?”

The figure in black sighed. “Ah, the greed of humans! Our Shixin Buddha is like a man standing atop a mountain, plucking stars from the heavens. I’m just an insignificant ant. How could I dare to challenge him?”

Liu Guicang sneered. “A thousand taels bought the Garuda’s life. Would three thousand be enough to buy Shixin’s?”

“Of course not,” the black-clad figure said with a mysterious smile. “I’m very loyal to him.”

Liu Guicang burst out laughing as though he’d just heard a joke. “Loyal?! Everyone knows Qiye Garden’s assassins sell their loyalties for coins. What, is three thousand taels not enough? Then make it four thousand. You don’t need to lift a finger—just tell me where he is.”

“Villa Master Liu, you may know every sword technique in the world, but you know nothing of the Garden’s traditions,” the black-clad figure said softly. “Haven’t you heard the legend? Long ago, when war ravaged the land and poverty gripped the people, swordsmen roamed the realm with their blades. Back then, when people had grievances, they wrote the names of their enemies on the bricks of temples then prayed to the Buddha for justice. To show respect, they left offerings of food—sometimes buns with scraps of meat, sometimes sugared rolls. When passing swordsmen saw the names and offerings, they ate the food and took up their blades to kill those named.

“Later, these swordsmen came together to form the Garden—the first assassins. They shared their roofs and meals with thieves and bandits and their beds with courtesans. Whenever they heard a plea to the Buddha, they

took up their blades and traveled thousands of miles for the sake of the kill. Those were our forefathers. They fought and killed, all to survive."

"But now you kill for money. Or perhaps for mansions and women."

"Wrong, wrong." The figure in black shook his head. "Now we are ghosts who walk in the night, taking lives by name. We kill in return for nothing."

"In the end, you're just afraid to oppose Shixin," Liu Guicang said disdainfully. "What about Xiahou Lian's life, then? Surely you can give me that."

The black-robed figure shook his head again.

Furious, Liu Guicang rose to his feet, flicking his sleeves. "What difference does it make to you whether Xiahou Lian lives or dies? He's just a coward!"

"Wrong again," the figure in black said. He stood, clasping his hands before him and striding toward the forest. "He is half the Garuda; he's the future of the Garden. Why else would I travel so far to cooperate with a worm like you? A true blade is forged by hatred and tempered by blood. The hatred he already has. All he needs now is blood."

Liu Guicang's eyes widened in alarm. "What…what do you mean?"

"Your blood will lay the foundation for his rise as leader of the Garden," the black-clad figure said calmly. "Goodbye, Villa Master Liu."

When the curtains swayed once more, the black-clad figure had vanished without a trace, as though the man had never existed. Liu Guicang sank into his seat, trembling as cold sweat dripped down his back.

What did he mean? Did he help me just so Xiahou Lian could kill me? Nonsense! He's trash, too cowardly to show his face even while my dogs devoured his mother. How could he possibly take my life?

Liu Guicang calmed a little, stroking the saber in his hand. Then he recalled the look in Xiahou Lian's eyes on the street that day, and a shiver ran down his spine.

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THE BLACK-CLAD FIGURE sauntered slowly through the dense forest, his feather-light footsteps seeming to float above the ground, as quiet as whispers. A short distance away, a small stream flowed; along its edge, washerwomen stood pounding clothes, their sleeves rolled up and their pants tied high. The glint of sunlight on their bare arms and legs made them look like tender lotus roots, pale and delicate.

"Ah, I forgot," the black-clad figure murmured to himself. "He still needs a woman. One beautiful and gentle enough to heal the pain of losing his mother. A boy becomes a man in a woman's bed."

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A SWIFT HORSE GALLOPED to the gates of the Eastern Depot's headquarters. Its rider, an Eastern Depot agent clad in black armor, vaulted forward off his mount; the exhausted horse behind him let out a mournful

whinny and collapsed to the ground. Since the agent carried an official document marked *urgent dispatch*, the guards dared not delay—they opened the gates and let him through. Clutching the document carefully in both hands, the agent rushed past the spirit screen, through the moon gate, and directly into the rear hall.

There, Shen Jue was sipping hot tea. “What is it?”

The agent knelt at the threshold. “An urgent message from Liuzhou. The Garuda has been killed at Jingdao Villa. Villa Master Liu Guicang left her corpse in the marketplace and set dogs upon her remains. The Garden has yet to respond.”

The teacup slipped from Shen Jue’s grasp, splashing him with tea. Shen Wenxing gasped in alarm and frantically grabbed a cloth to wipe him down.

The Garuda is dead? Shen Jue thought in disbelief; the image of that demonic woman, her lips curled in a faint smile, was still fresh in his mind. If she was dead, what about her son?

“Is there any news of Xiahou Lian?” he asked quickly.

“None.”

Shen Jue sat in stunned silence for a while until Shen Wenxing quietly asked, “Godfather, should I fetch you a clean robe?”

Shen Jue glanced at the tea stains on his clothes and shook his head. “Do we know how the Garuda was killed?”

“According to our informant, it was raining heavily in Liuzhou on the day of the assassination,” the agent replied. “The Garuda had old wounds from a lashing she’d endured for her son years ago. The rain caused her injuries to flare up, and Liu Guicang killed her as she faltered.”

Shen Jue was stupefied. Lashings? Old wounds? Was this because Xiahou Lian let him escape five years ago? Shen Jue's mind was a tangled mess; he had no idea what he was feeling. The past, long buried in dust, had resurfaced with unexpected consequences: He'd unwittingly had a hand in the Garuda's death. He'd never imagined that saving his life would cost Xiahou Lian and his mother so dearly!

What would Xiahou Lian do now? If he knew that saving Shen Jue had led to this, did he regret it? Did he blame himself?

Would he…never want to see Shen Jue again?

Shen Jue's eyes were dark and conflicted. He pressed his fingers so hard on the table that his fingertips turned white.

At that moment, the agent on guard rushed in carrying a sandalwood box. "Depot Chief, a mother and son just arrived with this box. They said a woman left it with them six months ago. She instructed them to bring it to the Eastern Depot if she didn't return within six months to claim it."

Shen Jue took the box and looked down at it, his expression inscrutable. Only the slight tremble of his thick lashes gave him away as he lifted the lid. Inside was a deed to a house on Jinggong Lane, behind Fuxiang Temple near Bulang Bridge. The deed listed the owner's name as Xiahou Lian.

Shen Jue rubbed the corner of the deed. "Where are that mother and son?" he asked.

The pair nervously huddled together, their padded jackets covered in patches but clean. The child timidly poked his fluffy-haired head out from behind his mother to look at Shen Jue.

“The woman who gave you this box—do you know who she was?” Shen Jue added.

“A female martial artist, and a hero,” the mother said softly. “She said her surname was Xiahou. She saved my little Xiao-Bao when he fell into the water. We’ve never opened the box, Your Excellency, and we don’t know what’s inside. Can…can we go home now?”

“You brought it here despite not knowing what was inside?” Shen Wenxing asked curiously. “Weren’t you afraid it might get you in trouble?”

“I could tell that she was a mother,” the woman said. “And a mother wouldn’t do anything bad.”

Shen Jue waved his hand, gesturing for Shen Wenxing to give the woman a few silver ingots and escort her and her son out. He dismissed the others then lifted the curtain to enter the back room. He placed the box beside the blade Jingtie, its black lacquer shimmering with a glossy glow under the oil lamp’s pale light. Shen Jue stroked the box in silence. Xiahou Pei had long foreseen her death, and this was her way of reminding Shen Jue of the ten-year promise they’d made.

Parents who loved their children thought far ahead, planning their futures with great care.

Xiahou Pei, your wish has been heard.

Chapter 40:
The Black-Faced Buddha

HEIMIANFO—the Black-Faced Buddha—was a towering cliff that jutted into the clouds, its jagged rocks pitch black and overgrown with weeds. From certain angles, it vaguely resembled the shape of a seated Buddha. Standing at its base, one almost heard the ancient, resonant chanting of Buddhist sutras; it was enough to inspire one to kneel in reverence.

The winter snow blanketed the entire mountain in white, including Heimianfo itself; drifting clouds shrouded the Buddha's neck and head, while its body lay covered in thick snow that resembled a monk's white robe, pure and solemn.

Xiahou Lian climbed, braving the biting wind. He carried only a few cold buns, some flint, and a rope, as well as his blade, Hengbo. Fine snow settled on his eyelashes until they resembled white crow feathers. His feet had long since numbed, but he trudged forward mechanically like a puppet oblivious to the cold.

He'd returned home once. The bamboo house had already been desolate; with one resident fewer, it felt even more like a ruin.

Initially, Xiahou Lian sometimes forgot his mother was gone. Out of habit, he'd knock on her door each morning to wake her. He would prepare meals for two, setting the table with two bowls. He was used to living alone in the bamboo house, but now he was at a loss.

He sat under the eaves for hours at night, lost and staring into space. The mountain nights were eerily silent, as if the world had emptied, leaving only him behind. He felt like a young wolf that had stepped into the treacherous forest alone for the first time, freshly trained to hunt, but then been battered and wounded by foes. That young wolf had believed that he could return to the warmth of his mother wolf's care, only for him to discover that their den was gone. However deep his wounds, no comfort awaited him.

Everyone told Xiahou Lian that death was inevitable, especially for their kind—living on the edge, lives hanging by a thread. Countless assassins had met gruesome ends, their bones piling up beneath sword mounds. None lived to old age. But those who told him that had forgotten that those assassins had no children; they lived and died alone, leaving no one to remember them when they vanished from the world.

Xiahou Pei, however, had a child. He was proof she'd once lived. Apart from Xiahou Lian, no one in this world would mourn her in the quiet of the night nor wander alone in the evening snow bearing her blade. Only he—her son, Xiahou Lian—could avenge her.

Looking at his palm, Xiahou Lian silently thought, *Yes. There's only me.*

It took him a full day to reach Heimianfo's shoulder. At that point, night had fallen, and he chose not to climb any farther. Instead, he lit a fire in a cave within the Buddha's ear, deciding to rest there for the night.

The vast night was black edged in faint blue. Snow blanketed the entire mountain. From the shoulder of the Black-Faced Buddha, the mountain's depths seemed shrouded in mist or some sourceless smoke. A

few lights occasionally shimmered into view, scattered across the mountain like lonely fireflies or fallen stars.

Xiahou Lian quickly spotted his bamboo hut, swallowed now by heavy darkness and deathly silence. He'd erected a cenotaph for Xiahou Pei there; if her spirit returned, it would find her favorite liquor placed before her tomb.

Holding Hengbo in his arms and stroking it, Xiahou Lian slowly closed his eyes.

Suddenly, the mournful sound of a xun drifted to his ears. Xiahou Lian shivered, unnerved to hear the sound in such a desolate, empty place. He stepped out of the cave and glanced upward, but the oppressive darkness revealed nothing. The source of the sound wasn't nearby; rather, it mingled with the wailing wind, like the whisper of an ancient ghost wandering the plains.

Is he the one playing the xun? Xiahou Lian sat by the fire, lost in thought. *Is it him?* That boy—his brother.

The sound of the xun was inexplicably powerful as it glided quietly over the rocks of Heimianfo and echoed into the distance. In that vast, cold night, Xiahou Lian suddenly sensed that someone else—someone like him—was also gazing at the dark, snowy mountain. And that person too was a lonely child, one who'd spent seventeen years on this snowy peak.

Xiahou Lian had never met Chiyan. Though they were brothers by blood, twins born almost simultaneously from their mother's womb, they were strangers. Xiahou Lian didn't know Chiyan's daily routine, his likes or dislikes. His mother had called Chiyan a fool, while Uncle Duan called him a genius with the saber.

But now Xiahou Lian knew: Chiyan was his older brother. Someone who—like him—was gazing at the snowy mountain in the vast, dark night.

Xiahou Lian fell asleep to the lingering notes of the xun. In his dreams, he saw a youth who shared his face on the snowy peak. The boy's distant gaze pierced the vast snowstorm and settled on him.

The next day, Xiahou Lian wrapped himself tightly in his cloak, pulled the hood securely over his face, and set off to continue climbing the mountain. The snow was lighter today, which made the ascent less strenuous. About half an hour later, he finally reached the peak of Heimianfo.

The summit was small; a few steps in any direction led to the cliff's edge. The little clearing's cluster of thatched huts formed a tiny, desolate courtyard enclosed by a rickety fence. The few flowerpots standing along a wall held plants that had long since withered in the cold.

"Is anyone here?" called Xiahou Lian.

No one answered. Was Chiyan not on the mountain? Impossible—Xiahou Lian had heard his xun last night.

After calling out several times more to no response, Xiahou Lian climbed the fence and peered through a rip in one hut's window paper. The main room was sparsely furnished, containing a square table and a heated bed topped with neatly folded clothes. A few pairs of boots and cloth shoes were lined up by a wall, which was decorated with a large kite made to look like a tiger with bared claws and fangs.

There was no one there.

Xiahou Pei had described Chiyan as a fool who only knew how to use his blade. Might such a fool have run away in fear at the sight of a

stranger? Xiahou Lian circled the house a few times, scanning the area, before he suddenly spotted a cave near the cliff, its entrance concealed by dead ivy. No wonder he'd overlooked it.

He stepped into the cave, following a winding path dozens of paces until the passage widened into a chamber as vast as a training ground. On the far side, a figure in white sat as if meditating upon a bed made of stone, his back to Xiahou Lian. He was lightly dressed in only a thin robe. It was as if he and Xiahou Lian occupied two completely different seasons.

"Uh…Chiyan?" Xiahou Lian said awkwardly.

As the figure slowly turned toward him, Xiahou Lian finally saw his face. It was nearly identical to his own; apart from the scar above Xiahou Lian's brow, they were almost indistinguishable. Still, no one would ever confuse the two because their eyes were completely different; Chiyan's were large, dark and clear as polished obsidian, seeming to reflect the ever-changing light of the sky and clouds.

Chiyan rose and looked at Xiahou Lian.

"Who are you?" His voice was soft.

"I'm Xiahou Lian," Xiahou Lian stammered nervously. "I don't know whether the abbot ever told you, but you have a—" Before he could finish, his pupils contracted sharply as the cold blade reflected in his eyes slashed toward him with deadly speed!

What the hell?!

Xiahou Lian frantically dodged, barely avoiding the blade as it grazed his face and embedded itself in the stone wall. In an instant, Chiyan twisted his wrist, already cleaving the air with his next strike!

The only thought in Xiahou Lian's mind was *How is he so ridiculously fast?* Chiyan moved like a shadow, his saber practically an extension of his body. Xiahou Lian couldn't even see him unleash his blows, relying solely on instinct to evade. Shallow cuts and deep gashes already marred his flesh; if his clothing weren't so thick, blood would have already soaked through.

"Those who ascend without the abbot's permission shall die," Chiyan said expressionlessly.

"I'm your younger brother!" Xiahou Lian shouted.

However, Chiyan didn't seem to care; his attacks continued unchanged. Xiahou Lian quickly steadied himself and drew Hengbo, barely blocking a strike aimed at his head. With his left hand, he tore away his hood and yelled, "Look at me! I'm your younger brother!"

Chiyan froze, staring at Xiahou Lian's face. Xiahou Lian looked down at his own tattered robe, scowling at the cotton stuffing that spilled from the slashes in the cloth. He grimaced in agonized frustration. This was the only robe he'd brought. If all the stuffing fell out, how would he stay warm?

"Younger brother?" Chiyan looked confused.

Xiahou Lian sighed. It seemed the old bald donkey had never mentioned him to Chiyan. As he pondered how to explain things, Chiyan poked Xiahou Lian's face with a finger.

"Is a younger brother someone who looks exactly like me?" Chiyan asked. "Are you another me?"

Xiahou Lian stared at him with wide eyes. *Fucking hell… He really is a fool.* With a great deal of effort, he managed to explain that he wasn't a second Chiyan.

His brother nodded and said "Oh," meaning that he understood.

Chiyan was peculiar. At seventeen, he stood as tall as Xiahou Lian, yet he acted childish. Raised on the summit of Heimianfo, he rarely went down the mountain except to kill. He knew nothing of people and their conventions, and he didn't even grasp the concept of a brother.

Before Xiahou Lian could communicate with him, he first had to explain what "older brother" and "younger brother" meant until Chiyan understood.

After that, Xiahou Lian settled down atop Heimianfo. He tidied the hut's kitchen, lighting the stove at night and sleeping beside it—that way, he didn't feel cold. Chiyan rarely spoke and spent most of his time silently lost in his own thoughts, his mind a mystery. He often perched on the

branch of an old tree near the cliff to gaze into the distance. Sometimes he played the xun that Xiahou Lian had heard before. When Xiahou Lian asked whether He wanted to stand up straight and leave the mountain, Chiyan simply shook his head and said that the mountain was more beautiful than the world below.

Sometimes Xiahou Lian felt that Chiyan was a lone wolf staring up at the sky. His twin's eyes were always lonely and empty when they looked down at the mountain.

But he was a truly exceptional swordsman. His saber was called Shana—"instant"—and his swift strikes suited the name. Any battle with Chiyan was over in an instant; no other weapon could match his blade's speed.

Chiyan was also easy to talk to. He did whatever Xiahou Lian asked. When Xiahou Lian requested that Chiyan teach him swordplay, his brother agreed without hesitation. The two stood in the open space of the cave, surrounded by wild grass, sabers in hand.

Xiahou Lian shouted as he drew Hengbo, its blade shimmering like flowing water. Chiyan stood motionless, silently observing. Then, as Xiahou Lian closed in, Chiyan stepped forward with a twitch of his left hand. Xiahou Lian never saw Chiyan unsheathe his blade; he only felt a sharp chill on his side and glanced down to discover blood streaming from his waist.

Fucking hell… "Chiyan, are you crazy? You actually went for the kill!"

Xiahou Lian clutched his waist in despair, rummaging for his medical chest so he could bandage himself. Fortunately, the cold mountain air

slowed his bleeding.

“Are we not practicing anymore?” Chiyan asked, confused.

Xiahou Lian raised his head and saw Chiyan’s guileless expression. “Were you seriously trying to kill me just now?”

Chiyan sat beside him. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Xiahou Lian was quiet a moment, then suddenly understood. With difficulty, he asked, “How did you practice with others before?”

“The abbot brought people for me to fight. The first was Achacuo from the Western Regions. He had a beautiful saber inlaid with gold that gleamed under the moonlight,” Chiyan reminisced. “But he wasn’t fast enough—I killed him in one move. Next, the abbot brought the Snowy Mountain Twin Eagles, a husband-and-wife pair. I killed the man in three moves, and then the woman took her own life. The third was a Japanese man. His sword was very long, about six feet. That kill took me six moves. After that, the abbot sent ten men to fight me. They didn’t announce their names. They seemed to come from different places, all with different styles of swordplay. That was tough; it took me twenty moves to kill all ten.”

Xiahou Lian felt a pang of sadness. Chiyan was nothing more than a blade forged by the abbot—a weapon devoid of thought or emotion, free from fear or hesitation—that would kill anyone the abbot wanted dead without fail.

He couldn’t understand why the abbot had been so heartless. Perhaps it was simply the nature of the world that the strong saw all living beings as mere ants. Joy and sorrow, love and hatred, life and death all depended on their whims. What did it matter to the abbot if one of the ants was his own

son? To a powerful man like him, Chiyan was no different from any other insect.

Had Liu Guicang felt that way when he trampled Xiahou Pei? Had he experienced a twisted sense of triumph, as if he were standing above the clouds, knowing that the strongest assassin had fallen to his blade, and that his dogs had devoured her flesh and bones?

Ridiculous. One had to ford rivers of blood and ascend piles of bones to reach a summit from which to look down upon the world beneath. Xiahou Lian clenched his fists, fierce anger surging through him. “If they can do it, why can’t I?” he asked himself. “Why shouldn’t life and death depend on my whims, letting me do as I please and rampage unchecked? So what if this blade commits boundless slaughter and slakes itself on hot blood?”

A basin of cold water splashed over his head, drenching him from head to toe. “What the hell are you doing?!” Xiahou Lian roared.

“You were possessed,” Chiyan said slowly, setting down the basin.

Xiahou Lian wiped the water from his face and turned away.

“The mortal world is full of hardship. Not everything can be as you wish,” Chiyan said.

Xiahou Lian was taken aback to hear these words from a fool like Chiyan. Turning to face his brother, he saw that Chiyan’s expression was as calm as ever, his obsidian eyes as tranquil as still water. It struck Xiahou Lian that perhaps Chiyan wasn’t completely ignorant. Perhaps he even knew *everything*, and it was just that the world’s joys and sorrows couldn’t touch him.

Chiyan paused, then added, “If your mother is dead, can’t you just find a new one?”

That single question pushed back all of Xiahou Lian’s previous thoughts. He looked at Chiyan, whose expression seemed to ask, *Did I say something wrong?*

Sighing, Xiahou Lian muttered weakly, “Forget it. There’s no point getting mad at you.” He gave the oblivious fellow a light pat and added, “Next time, I’ll bring you a copy of *Standards for a Good Disciple*[8] or *The Plum in the Golden Vase*[9]—you should study those properly so you don’t go around acting like an idiot all the time. What’ll you do if you go down the mountain and end up getting tricked?”

Chiyan nodded obediently.

Chapter 41:
Kill Without Mercy

"AGAIN!" said Xiahou Lian. A moment later, he repeated, "That didn't count. Again!" Finally, Chiyan knocked Hengbo away for the ninety-eighth time. "Ugh! Damn it! I refuse to believe I can't beat you!"

Xiahou Lian knelt on the ground, his hands trembling. Blood dripped from the wounds on his palms and at the base of each thumb, drops falling onto the snow like bright plum blossoms. Never before in his seventeen years had he practiced the saber until the skin of his hands split—and he still couldn't withstand a single strike from Chiyan.

Chiyan fetched bandages from the house and wrapped Xiahou Lian's hands. Blood quickly soaked through the white cloth, staining it with spots like red ink. Xiahou Lian clenched his fists; a burning pain seared his palms, every finger screaming with exhaustion.

"Do you have any wine, Chiyan?"

Chiyan shook his head. The boy lived like an immortal—he neither drank alcohol nor ate meat. Xiahou Lian almost doubted that Chiyan even needed to relieve himself. He sighed again, then sat shoulder to shoulder with Chiyan under the wide eaves to watch the sun set over the distant mountains.

"Am I just hopeless?" Xiahou Lian asked, staring at his bloody palms. "I've tried my hardest, but this is all I have to show for it."

"You're not hopeless, just a bit slow," Chiyan replied.

Xiahou Lian turned to look at him, only for Chiyan's large, obsidian eyes to reflect his own face. Chiyan wasn't mocking him; he was genuinely trying to offer comfort.

Xiahou Lian sighed heavily. "When will I be good enough to kill Liu Guicang?"

"Is he that strong?" Chiyan asked.

"He's a grandmaster. They say his blade is like a bolt of lightning—inescapable, unavoidable. Whatever you do, it'll split you in two."

Chiyan was silent for a moment. He seemed deep in thought. "Maybe you could try to outlive him." Neither brother spoke. Then Chiyan added, "Or maybe you could find another way."

Xiahou Lian looked up. "What way?"

"I don't know." Chiyan shook his head. "I once met someone who made dough figurines. Business was terrible; he told me that I was his first customer in seven days. When I went back later, he had a new job, and people had started praising him. He said he earned a lot more money."

"What job did he switch to?"

"Collecting night soil."[10]

Xiahou Lian covered his face. "Chiyan…if you weren't my brother, I'd have punched you by now."

Confused, Chiyan drew his saber. "You want to fight?"

Day after day, Xiahou Lian practiced, and Chiyan sparred with him tirelessly. Yet Xiahou Lian always lost on the first move. It was a never-ending cycle: Chiyan would knock his blade from his hands, then Xiahou Lian would pick it up, only to have Chiyan knock it away again. Chiyan

stood in the snow, an insurmountable barrier, and repeatedly deflected each of Xiahou Lian's futile attempts to overcome him.

In early spring, Xiahou Lian went down the mountain. He returned with clothes for warmer weather and a few books. He piled the books on the table, *Standards for a Good Disciple* on top and *Intimate Scenes of Leisurely Love*[11] at the bottom. Then he practiced his blade outside while Chiyan sat indoors, reading beside a window through which they could see each other.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Xiahou Lian paused his practice and noticed that Chiyan had moved outside and was already seated under the eaves. Joining his brother, he took a sip of water and asked flippantly, "So, did you learn anything? I put them in order for you. Start with *Standards for a Good Disciple* to learn how to be a good kid, then *The Analects* to figure out how to be a decent person, and finally *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and *Intimate Scenes of Leisurely Love* to understand how to be a real man."

Chiyan's blank expression left Xiahou Lian unsure of what he was thinking. His mind might've been turbulent, but his face remained calm.

"Did you read *Intimate Scenes of Leisurely Love*? It teaches you how to, you know, do things with your wife. You should study it carefully. I found it among my mother's things, tucked under her bed. Digging it out was a lot of effort." Xiahou Lian lay on the ground, cradling his head. "I can't carry on the family line, so you'd better give us a child to keep the family name alive."

"Wife?" Chiyan frowned.

Xiahou Lian sat up abruptly, staring at Chiyan in exasperation. No wonder his brother was impassive; he didn't even know what a wife *was*. Chiyan might've been a master of the blade, but Xiahou Lian still had much to teach him about being human.

Feeling the weight of responsibility on his shoulders, Xiahou Lian chose his words carefully as he explained, "A wife is someone who'll spend her life with you, take care of your meals, help you rest, and bear you children. Got it? As men, we protect our wives and children even at the cost of our lives."

"What kind of person can be a wife?"

"Someone you like," Xiahou Lian replied, adding, "As long as she has at least a couple virtues—like being able to cook and sew!"

In the golden light of the setting sun, Chiyan turned to him. "I like you. Can you be my wife?" he asked. "You can even cook and sew, so you're perfect."

Xiahou Lian froze and stared at Chiyan, whose dark eyes were like ancient mirrors. A wave of sadness washed over him. This kid was beyond help. With a heavy sigh, he put an arm around Chiyan's shoulders. Though Chiyan appeared frail, his body was lean and strong, brimming with the power to slay gods and demons. The formidable assassin sat quietly, listening to Xiahou Lian as he began speaking.

"Chiyan, listen carefully: Your wife must fulfill three conditions. First, she must be human. Second, she must be a woman. Third, she should be younger than you—though two or three years older is fine too. I'll leave it to you whether she's also smart, virtuous, and good at managing a household. Understood?"

Chiyan took a moment to process Xiahou Lian's rejection. Then, looking a bit glum, he nodded reluctantly.

As time passed, Xiahou Lian's progress—if he made any—remained painstaking and slow. At best, he barely lasted a single move against Chiyan—and the only time he managed to do so was when Chiyan overate sticky rice dumplings at lunch and was in a rush to relieve himself.

Xiahou Lian felt completely lost. Perhaps he simply wasn't cut out to master the blade.

Conversely, Chiyan barely trained. He spent his days sitting either under the eaves or by the cliff's edge, staring blankly into the distance. Yet he could still defeat Xiahou Lian in one effortless move. Some skills required natural talent, and it seemed that when Xiahou Pei had the twins, she'd given Chiyan all the talent and left Xiahou Lian with only a knack for enjoying life. Swinging on tree vines and catching frogs in the forest were seemingly the extent of Xiahou Lian's skills.

Frustration began to consume Xiahou Lian. Night after night, he dreamed of Xiahou Pei's rotting corpse being devoured by dogs, yet his progress remained stagnant. Hengbo felt as sluggish in his hand as if it were rusted, its movements as dull and heavy like molten iron. At times, Xiahou Lian even imagined Hengbo mocking him, struggling to escape his grip.

Whenever he saw Chiyan idly playing the xun by the cliff, Xiahou Lian couldn't help but wish their mother had raised his brother instead. If Chiyan wanted Liu Guicang dead, the sword master wouldn't live to see another sunrise. But Xiahou Pei had raised Xiahou Lian, a useless piece of trash.

The mountain wind whipped Xiahou Lian's hair as he sat on the thatched roof, Hengbo in hand. The setting sun bled across the horizon, blindingly red.

"Xiao-Lian," came Chiyan's voice from behind.

Xiahou Lian gave a quiet grunt but didn't turn.

"I can capture disciples from Jingdao Villa for you to practice on," Chiyan blurted out.

Startled, Xiahou Lian jerked upright. Chiyan's expression was calm, as if he'd suggested the most ordinary thing in the world. Xiahou Lian's heart raced. Practicing on disciples was how Chiyan had trained—maybe it could work for him too. But…

Hesitant, he bit his lip. Just then, a pigeon fluttered down to land on his brother's head. Chiyan lifted it off and removed a note from its leg.

"What is it?" Xiahou Lian asked.

"A letter from the abbot," Chiyan replied. "He says Liu Guicang purchased the life of a grandmaster from a Northern sect. He's asking whether I'll take the job."

"What?!" Xiahou Lian shot to his feet. "Has he gone mad? Liu Guicang just killed my mother, and now the abbot wants to help him kill someone else?!"

Chiyan stared at him blankly.

The two fell into a heavy silence. It was as if the air itself froze, even the wind going still. Xiahou Lian suddenly understood the reality of Qiye Garden: For the right price, no deal was off limits.

Liu Guicang had killed the Garuda, the assassin sent after him, and no one blamed him for it. Assassins were like moths to a flame, drawn into the darkness with no autonomy, no choice. Who'd care about what some ugly moth thought? If a notorious assassin met their end and was devoured by dogs, leaving no remains, that wouldn't pain Liu Guicang, the wider world, or Qiye Garden itself. The only person who would feel anything was Xiahou Lian—in all the world, only him.

"Are you going to take the job?" Xiahou Lian asked hoarsely.

"No," Chiyan replied. "Someone else will."

Xiahou Lian sat down, forcibly suppressing the rage roiling inside him. His heart seemed to sink into an abyss as the sky darkened in kind. "What you said earlier about capturing Jingdao Villa disciples—did you mean it?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Then do it," Xiahou Lian heard himself say, slowly and deliberately. "The more, the better."

Chiyan and Xiahou Lian sneaked down the mountain, headed toward Liuzhou. Xiahou Lian searched the city's mass grave for remnants of Xiahou Pei's corpse but found nothing. The Liuzhou mortuary had organized its graves neatly, wrapping each anonymous body in a straw mat before laying it to rest, and none of the bodies were missing limbs.

Even the remains of these nameless dead were intact, yet Xiahou Pei—once a commanding presence in the jianghu—had no remains whatsoever.

They probably ground her to dust, Xiahou Lian thought numbly. A vengeful man like Liu Guicang wouldn't have left even a scrap of Xiahou

Pei’s corpse for more dogs to gnaw on.

The brothers rented a courtyard on the outskirts of town that had previously been used by human traffickers. They’d built high walls and fitted every door with three padlocks to prevent children from escaping. Chiyan began capturing people for Xiahou Lian to practice on; first, he brought back five disciples and locked them in an iron cage.

“How’s their swordplay?” asked Xiahou Lian.

“Really poor.”

“Start by letting three of them out, then.”

Chiyan nodded. He opened the iron gate, dragged out three men, and handed each a blade.

The disciples trembled in fear. The last thing they could recall was peacefully drinking tea in the city. Chiyan had appeared behind them like a ghost, knocked them unconscious, and brought them here without anyone noticing.

The two men facing the disciples looked identical. One had a cold, stern expression and a faint scar across his eye that gave his face a menacing edge. The other had no expression at all, his features calm and unruffled. He gazed down at them without joy or sorrow, like a deity in a temple.

The disciples concluded that these two madmen must want them to kill each other!

“Garuda… You’re the Garuda…” one of the disciples stammered, pointing a trembling finger at Xiahou Lian. The brothers bore a striking resemblance to Xiahou Pei; with his fierce gaze, Xiahou Lian especially looked just like her.

Ignoring the disciple, Xiahou Lian drew Hengbo from its sheath. He planned to make the men stand and fight him. He would observe their moves, memorize their katana saber techniques, and then devise counters—an efficient way to improve.

But the sight of Hengbo sent the disciple into a panic. “You…you’re the Garuda! The Garuda’s ghost has returned! Please have mercy! I didn’t mean to—I was acting entirely on the villa master’s orders! But the other two here… They cut you so many times. That one with the mole on his face, he even said that he would’ve had his way with you if your head weren’t already off…”

Xiahou Lian froze mid-draw.

“Shut up!” the disciple with the mole shouted. “You hacked her apart too! You even kicked her! That was what snapped her leg off!” He pointed at another disciple. “And you! You’re the one who suggested that the villa master use wolfhounds to flush out her son!”

“Stop it!” the third disciple cried. “I don’t want to die! It was all the villa master’s idea—he said he’d give a silver ingot to anyone who slashed the Garuda! I…I cut her thirteen times, but she was an assassin! Assassins deserve to die, don’t they?”

Xiahou Lian’s heart convulsed in a surge of agony, and something snapped in his mind. He suddenly found himself laughing at the absurdity of all this. His hands were already bloodstained—what difference would a little more blood make? Besides, these men deserved to be killed.

Xiahou Lian raised his eyes; there was a dark, ruthless glint in them. “Get up and fight me!”

“You…you’re not making us kill each other?” the disciple with the mole asked, dumbfounded.

“Kill each other?” Xiahou Lian sneered coldly. “That’d be far better than you deserve. Get up. Fight me!”

“You want the three of us to fight you alone?” The trio exchanged glances before bursting into laughter. “You’re a bit too full of yourself, brat! Boys, let’s kill this ghost-impersonating bastard! We killed the Garuda once, and we can kill *this* ‘Garuda’ again!”

The three disciples charged Xiahou Lian, who licked his teeth, tightening his grip on Hengbo.

The air thickened like molasses, and every sound slowed to a crawl—the metallic ring of blades, the rustle of clothing on gusts of air, the heavy thud of boots. The disciple on the left struck first, his blade narrowly missing Xiahou Lian’s hair. The one on the right hung back—he was waiting, preparing to deliver a lethal blow when Xiahou Lian was trapped.

In an instant, Xiahou Lian made a decision. Hengbo dodged the incoming blade, slicing upward to leave a fine but bone-deep line across the first man’s face. He’d used a Garden saber art called Swallow’s Swoop. Next, Xiahou Lian pivoted sharply to the right, his blade arcing like a crescent moon to strike the second man’s shoulder. That severed his arm, and blood gushed forth. Finally, Xiahou Lian stepped through the spray of the man’s blood, his blade twisting in a serpentine path to pierce the third man’s abdomen. With a wrenching motion, he twisted the blade, churning the disciple’s insides. Blood poured from the wound as the man clutched Hengbo, collapsing to his knees.

Something felt different. Xiahou Lian's grip on Hengbo was as firm as welded iron, and the sound of tearing flesh and breaking bone sent a surge of heat through his veins. Staring down at the growing pool of blood at his feet, Xiahou Lian snapped back to reality, looking around in a daze.

All three men lay dead on the ground. The two still in the cage stared at him in terror, as if he were a bloodthirsty monster.

Chiyan opened the cage again, picking up two blades from the blood-soaked ground and tossing them to the remaining disciples.

"Continue."

One of the men roared and rushed forward with the blade. Xiahou Lian had no time to think and swiftly struck out with his saber, reflexively shutting his eyes as warm blood sprayed across his face.

The last man collapsed to his knees, weeping and begging for mercy. "I'm new! I only joined last month! Winter was harsh, and my family had no food. My parents' only choice was to send me to Jingdao Villa. Everyone knows how brutal the training is there! I didn't even know who the Garuda was! Please, I beg you, spare me!"

Xiahou Lian hesitated, his blade pausing in midair. In that moment, a flash of light caught his eye—the glint of a blade. His assassin's instincts screamed a warning. Sure enough, a willow-leaf dagger slid from the man's sleeve and into his palm, aimed straight at Xiahou Lian's heart.

Xiahou Lian's pupils contracted.

A hand with a firm grip seized his own right hand, steering Hengbo to deflect the dagger and slice through the man's throat as effortlessly as snapping a brittle twig. The man's head rolled across the ground, leaving behind a trail of inky blood.

Xiahou Lian turned to see Chiyan standing beside him, his hand on Xiahou Lian's.

"Never hesitate, Xiao-Lian," Chiyan said quietly, his gaze as detached and cold as that of a stone deity watching from atop an altar. "If you stop, demons will crawl up from the depths and grab you by the ankles. So never hesitate."

Chapter 42:
The Night's Chill

STREWN ACROSS THE GROUND amid scattered fragments of blue-and-white porcelain, the bodies buzzed with flies. Shen Wenxing finally couldn't hold himself back any longer, and he ran to the courtyard to vomit. By the curved counter was a pot of azaleas, their fiery red blossoms vibrant against the soil, which was itself stained red—when the old shopkeeper was cut down, the flowers were splattered with his blood.

Seven were dead in total. The assassin's true target had been Eunuch Wang, who lay in the center of the main hall, eyes wide open and fixed on the ceiling beams. It was clear he'd had no time to escape before a single stroke slit his throat. The bodies of Eunuch Wang's two personal attendants lay side by side under the table, their lifeless eyes staring at one another like those of startled hens. The assassin had used a twin-bladed Garden knife to slit their throats simultaneously. The remaining three casualties were shop attendants killed one after the other near the threshold. All had been struck down by a slash to the back, a lethal blow so ferocious it nearly cleaved them in two. The assassin must have killed them on the spot, fearing that they'd report the crime.

Situ Jin frowned deeply as he examined the corpses. "This assassin was ruthless. Every strike was precise and deadly—no hesitation at all. My subordinates learned that Eunuch Wang arrested several martial artists from the jianghu last month. He had some beaten to death in prison. This looks like jianghu-style retribution—they must have pooled their money to hire a Garden assassin to settle the score."

Having emptied his stomach, Shen Wenxing returned and added, “Eunuch Wang had it coming. A couple years ago, he adopted a relative’s son, and the boy turned out to be nothing but trouble—an infamous little tyrant in the pleasure districts. He’s notorious for visiting countless courtesans of every description. He ran up an enormous amount of debt and drained everything Eunuch Wang had saved over a dozen years. Eunuch Wang targeted those ruffians out of desperation, but it cost him his life—not worth it at all.”

Glancing at Shen Wenxing, Shen Jue noticed the vomit-stained embroidery on the boy’s knees. He covered his nose with his fan disdainfully. “Go over there. Stay away from me.”

Well acquainted with his senior’s aversion to filth, Shen Wenxing wisely moved aside.

Suddenly, a commotion erupted from the kitchen—a burst of shouts followed by the crash of dishes shattering like ice. Shen Jue looked over and saw several officers dragging a disheveled man his way. They shoved the man forward.

“We found a survivor, Depot Chief.”

The man appeared deranged, drooling as he repeated, “The ghost’s here! The ghost’s here!” Then he caught sight of the ferocious serpent on Shen Jue’s uniform. He immediately lost his mind, frantically kicking as he scrambled backward. Clutching a pillar, he shouted, “Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me!”

“He was hiding in the kitchen rafters,” an agent explained. “That’s how he survived; assassins move at night, and the rafters are dark. Unfortunately, he’s gone mad.”

Shen Jue signaled with his eyes, and an agent immediately stepped forward. He pulled out an ornate agate bottle and held it near the survivor's nose. The item, which originated from the Russians, was used to restore clarity of mind. Sure enough, the man calmed after inhaling it, staring blankly at Shen Jue.

"I'm going to ask you a question," Shen Jue said. "What did you see?"

The man remained dazed.

Shen Wenxing slapped him. "The depot chief asked you a question. Did you see what the assassin looked like?"

When the man's head snapped to the side, his gaze landed on the courtyard's central skylight. This was a small, Jiangnan-style courtyard. At its center sat a blue porcelain basin holding a tuberose. A few drops of blood had spattered its pure-white petals, lending the scene a sinister touch. When the man saw the tuberose, he shuddered and stammered, "He came from there…from there…"

Shen Wenxing followed the man's gaze. "Where? Where?"

The survivor shakily got to his feet and suddenly grabbed a goose-quill saber from one agent's waist. Startled, everyone drew their blades and surrounded him.

"He stood there like this! Look—just like this!" The man picked up a wooden stick from the ground, hunched a little, and crossed his arms in an eerie gesture. Suddenly, he lifted his face to reveal a ferocious grin beneath his disheveled hair. "I am the Wuminggui of the Garden, come to send Eunuch Wang to paradise."

Looking at him, Shen Jue could almost see the assassin stepping over the moonlight that carpeted the ground like frost, twin sabers gleaming in his hands as he slowly approached. He spoke up, his voice overlapping with the madman's low, hoarse mumbling. "Did you see the sabers he used?" he asked, waving to signal the guards to stand down.

"I saw them… I saw them clearly. Hengbo—he wielded Hengbo!" The man opened his hands, the saber and stick clattering to the ground as he collapsed to his knees. "It was a ghost! He was a ghost!"

For the first time, a crack appeared in Shen Jue's calm façade. Hidden from sight beneath his pipa sleeves,[12] his fist slowly clenched.

In his mind, the assassin's face came into focus under the moonlight: a twenty-one-year-old Xiahou Lian, his youthful immaturity long gone, a grown man standing in his place. But the smile on his otherwise familiar face was unrecognizable, dangerous and menacing.

Seven years. They'd been apart for seven long years. Shen Jue furrowed his brow silently; in the end, he said nothing.

"Hengbo?" Shen Wenxing exclaimed in surprise. "Didn't Hengbo belong to the Garuda? How did this Wuminggui end up with it?"

"Does the Eastern Depot have any records on the Wuminggui?" Shen Jue asked Situ Jin.

"Yes," Situ Jin replied. "We have more files on him than any of the other assassins who've gained notoriety over the last few years. He's the culprit behind the beheading of that wealthy man in Suzhou. He's crueller and more ruthless than the Garuda, and he's seemingly a master of disguise as well. The Embroidered Uniform Guard has been investigating him for a while, but so far, we have no leads."

“I want to see the files. Have them brought to me when we return to the capital,” Shen Jue ordered, then turned to descend the steps. Situ Jin, Shen Wenxing, and the rest of the entourage followed close behind. As a high-ranking official of the Eastern Depot, Shen Jue naturally commanded overwhelming attention. A crowd of curious onlookers had gathered outside the inn, but Shen Jue didn’t even bat an eye at them as he stepped onto Shen Wenxing’s shoulder to board the carriage.

Before he could even settle in, someone slipped a letter and a golden tassel through the curtain.

“The Noble Consort has sent a message,” said an agent outside. “She hopes you can find time for a visit. That tassel was handmade by Zhuxia, one of Her Highness’s closest maids. She said that, when you last came to pay your respects, she noticed that your fan lacked a tassel—perhaps an oversight by your subordinates. She crafted one herself and hopes you will accept it.”

Shen Jue scoffed and tossed the tassel out the window. It fluttered lightly in the sunlight, like a butterfly with broken wings, then landed beside the carriage wheel. As the carriage moved forward, the wheel crushed the tassel, leaving a deep furrow over it.

At dusk, Shen Jue changed into casual attire and headed for the Qinhuai River, where he boarded a small boat to a floating pavilion.

The red glow of the setting sun reflected on the water, shimmering like silk cut by scissors or the remnants of rouge on a woman’s cheeks. Even before night had fully fallen, courtesans emerged, waving their colorful sleeves from the boat’s railings. The rippling river wafted their sweet, alluring fragrance through the air, and it swirled in the heart of the

waves. One courtesan held a huqin and softly sang Wu folk tunes, her tender voice and winding melody leaving listeners lightheaded, as if dazed.

Along the banks of Qinhuai River, countless doors and windows faced the bank. Some riverside houses had steps leading directly into the water; there, women squatted to wash clothes, the sunset draping a red glow over the garments. Peddlers rowed small boats laden with goods back and forth like leaves adrift on the water. Their occasional calls echoed far along the river.

This was Shen Jue's first visit to Qinhuai River. Back when he'd been studying with Dai Shengyan, his teacher went to the Confucius Temple to give a lecture on *The Book of Songs*[13] at Zhuiyue Tower, taking him along. The building was tall, and from its heights, one could see the flowing river. The river was a place of revelry, and Dai Shengyan had always forbidden him from getting too close. Shen Jue still remembered the Zhuiyue Tower's crab-roe buns—one bite, and the rich, golden filling burst in his mouth.

"Truly the most precious of locations," said Shen Wenxing. "Multitudes more elegant than the Eight Great Alleys back in the capital. Most of the courtesans here reportedly belong to the famous Yangzhou Companions. They're trained from a young age in music, poetry, and the arts. They can compose poems and lyrics that rival even the top scholars'," he continued with a laugh, turning his head to glance at the expressionless Situ Jin. "Lord Situ, you worked hard escorting us all this way. While you're here, why not stay the night and try something new?"

Situ Jin glanced at him briefly before returning his gaze to the shimmering river, ignoring the younger boy.

The brothel manager's eyes crinkled into a smile when he saw Shen Jue. He leaned in to hand him a gilded booklet containing a song list written in tiny calligraphy. "What songs would you like to hear, Young Master? Our girls can sing anything you might wish—even the Eighteen Touches,[14] if you like."

Shen Jue ignored him, and Shen Wenxing took the booklet without looking at it. Instead he said, "We're from the north, so we have refined tastes—we only enjoy Kunqu opera. Do you happen to have a maiden who can sing that?"

The brothel manager plastered on a grin and was about to respond when it dawned on him that the guest's speech, the way his words twisted and turned, suggested the party was from the palace. His heart sank, and he bowed hastily. "Follow me, my lords."

The night had deepened, and the riverside buildings lit their lamps, forming a glowing string of light along both shores. It looked as if golden edges had been embroidered onto the Qinhuai. Servants carrying bamboo poles hung red silk lanterns beneath the eaves of floating pavilions. Those lanterns cast a hazy, dreamlike red glow, while men and women shared drinks under the flickering light. The fragrance of wine mingled with the slick, sweet laughter, as if in a surreal dream.

The brothel manager led Shen Jue and his entourage to a private room on the second floor, but he slipped away without tidying it. The room was at the front of the pavilion. Windows on three sides overlooked the river, which reflected the constellations above. A yellow pearwood table and chairs stood in the center of the room; against the wall were several

gold-lacquered mother-of-pearl stools meant for the singers. A painting hung on one wall, elegant though counterfeit.

Shen Wenxing used a handkerchief to thoroughly wipe down the furniture; only then did Shen Jue take his seat. Once settled, he nodded to Shen Wenxing, who walked to the wall and removed the painting to reveal a small square panel the size of one's palm. As he slid it open, faint light from the neighboring private room seeped through. Shen Wenxing knocked rhythmically: three quick taps, a pause, then one last tap. Someone on the other side replied, four taps in succession. Shen Wenxing nodded to Shen Jue and stepped quietly aside.

The voice of a middle-aged man spoke from behind the wall. "Your humble servant Gao Nian greets the depot chief. I've earned the Garden's trust and taken control of the secret base at the Confucius Temple."

Shen Jue sipped his tea. "Well done. The effort that went into nurturing you wasn't wasted. So long as you continue to serve me well, your wife, children, and elderly mother will be well cared for."

"Thank you, Depot Chief!" Gao Nian kneeled to bow his head to the ground twice, then stood back up. "Since you summoned me, Depot Chief, is there something you wish to ask?"

Shen Jue rubbed the jade-white porcelain cup in his hand. "How much do you know about the Wuminggui?"

Gao Nian pondered that for a moment before replying. "My humble self has only been with the Garden for a year. They have strict rules: Don't ask questions. Kill without mercy. Their secret bases spill a little here and there but generally keep everything to themselves. Honestly, all I've heard are rumors, and I dare not say whether any are true."

“Go on.”

“The Wuminggui’s real name is Xiahou Lian. He’s the son of the former Garuda, Xiahou Pei. He has risen to prominence in recent years—you could call him a rising star, but he doesn’t have a great reputation within the Garden itself. Just like his mother, he works alone. He never interacts with us agents. I’ve heard that he’s set up several hidden dens for himself.”

“Oh? Do you know where those hidden dens are?”

“No,” Gao Nian replied. “The only ones who know are Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing.”

“Who are they?”

“The depot chief has spent many years deep within the palace in the capital, so you might not have caught wind of the rumors on the streets. A particular poem has recently become quite popular in brothels, teahouses, and wine shops: ‘Fleeting shadows dance. An arrow pierces the air. In the spring city, flutes sing among the wails of a hundred ghosts. Mists veil the river; sorrows halt the crossing. The River of Helplessness[15] brims with vengeful souls.’ The poem describes three people’s weapons. The ‘shadows’ represent Tang Shiqi’s crossbow, Zhaoying. Tang Shiqi was a disciple of the Tang Clan. While he was traveling three years ago, Liu Guicang captured him, but Xiahou Lian came to his rescue. Tang Shiqi has worked for Xiahou Lian ever since. Two years ago, Xiahou Lian disguised himself as Tang Shiqi and infiltrated the Tang Clan. He burned their library of writings before escaping, taking a pair of mechanical wings. Now both of them are on the Tang Clan’s kill list.”

“I reported this matter to the depot chief before,” Situ Jin said. “I once sent someone to investigate the Tang Clan. Their leader said that the Wuminggui had secretly mastered the clan’s seventy-two mechanical arts and stole those wings to escape Yixiantian. On the day he escaped, they set up a trap in advance—a massive net over the narrow cliffs. But the Tang Clan disciples who donned wings themselves and gave chase ended up trapped in the net. They could only watch as the Wuminggui flew down to the Jialing River and escaped by boat.”

“He later infiltrated various sects and stole their saber arts,” Gao Nian added. “He even managed to take the Seven-Star Chain-Saber arts from the distant Tian Shan mountains.”

“His goal is revenge. He stole those mechanical arts because his swordsmanship won’t be enough to defeat Liu Guicang. And he studied all those saber arts to find a way to counter the katana saber.” Shen Jue tapped his knee; the rough golden threads of his garment’s embroidery scraped and irritated his fingers as he asked, “What about the second weapon?”

“The flute blade Yizhichun is Shu Qing’s weapon. He’s a greenhorn, supposedly Xiahou Lian’s shidi. For the past year, Xiahou Lian has brought Shu Qing along on every assignment. According to rumor, the boy is timid and cowardly, not at all cut out to be an assassin. The third weapon, of course, is Hengbo.”

“Xiahou Lian wasn’t cut out to be an assassin either, yet he’s become a fearsome one,” Shen Jue said coldly. “Now, I asked you to gather information on the whereabouts of Qiye Garden temple. Any leads?”

Gao Nian sighed. “I’m afraid your humble servant has let you down, Depot Chief. So far, I haven’t found a single one. The Garden’s rules are

terribly strict, and anyone who breaks them is deprived of Seven Fifteen. So everyone is careful to follow the rules to the letter—no one dares step out of line. That said… Governor, have you heard of the Garden's underground city?"

Shen Jue looked up. "Underground city?"

"It isn't a literal city, but a counterpart to the world 'above.' Where there's light in that world, there's darkness in the underground city. The court has courier stations; the Garden likewise has relay stations. The markets have teahouses, and so does the Garden. Even brothels, banks, wine shops—the Garden has all of those. Bandits, thieves, fugitives, prostitutes, and assassins can shelter, rest, eat, and drink in these places. Whatever ordinary people can do, they can do as well."

"A kingdom in the shadows," Situ Jin murmured.

Shen Jue sneered. "So does that make Qiye Garden's abbot the emperor of the dark?"

"Not entirely," said Gao Nian. "The Garden doesn't run the underground city directly. They just station one person at each base to accommodate the visiting assassins. The criminal underworld shares the underground city—bandits provide food for thieves, and prostitutes keep assassins company. It's a haven for those who can't live in the light."

Shen Wenxing clicked his tongue. "We walk in the sunlight believing these filthy creatures are restricted to scurrying in the gutters. Who would've imagined that they'd build themselves an actual city in the cracks?"

Shen Jue narrowed his eyes. "Who are you calling a filthy creature?"

Seeing that Shen Jue was displeased, but unsure which of his senior's taboos he'd violated, Shen Wenxing hurriedly knelt and slapped himself. "Your godson misspoke! He deserves to be punished! He deserves it!"

The moon had risen, pale and round as the soft white breast of a bird curled atop the eaves of a house. A small boat glided closer, its oars breaking the water's surface in a gentle rhythm. A refined courtesan sat aboard, strumming her pipa as she sang a tender melody from Wu. The pleasure boat floated side by side with a skiff, passing through the layered shadows of swaying willows before drifting under one of the bridge's three tall arches. The courtesan's voice mingled with the babble of the river, as sweet and intoxicating as honeyed wine.

Shen Jue felt a sense of unreality. All around him were scenes of revelry and grandeur, yet beneath their serene beauty lay the shadows of a vast city—Great Qi's dark underbelly. Somewhere within those shadows, Xiahou Lian walked, materializing on the streets after dark to claim lives.

"Gao Nian, you've done well," he said. "Your wife, children, and elderly mother will be cared for as promised. Your son has already enrolled in school and composed some decent trial poems. Wenxing, show them to him."

Shen Wenxing murmured a quiet acknowledgement and pulled a stack of thick rice paper from his sleeve, passing it through the small square panel to Gao Nian.

Gao Nian read through it, then tearfully said, "Thankfully, my child has some talent—unlike his useless father. I'm incredibly grateful for your support, Depot Chief. Knowing you're looking out for us, I can rest easy."

As Shen Jue began to nod, the music from the boat suddenly faltered, transforming into a piercing screech. At the same moment, a black arrow shot from the other side of the compartment, its shrill whistle echoing like the cry of an owl. The sharp, penetrating sound seemed to pierce through one's mind. Shen Jue swiftly dodged. The arrow grazed his hair and extinguished the candle behind him, instantly plunging the private room into darkness.

"Be on guard!" Situ Jin roared.

Three long blades simultaneously pierced the walls, cleaving apart the partition between the two chambers, which was hewn from wood half a palm thick. After hacking that open, the assassins crashed through the wooden remnants into the dark room. Only the pale moonlight filtered through the window screens; it cast a faint, ghostly glow as the crouching assassins advanced like demons.

The melody on the river grew urgent, but Shen Jue remained still, holding his porcelain cup and listening quietly. He could almost see the courtesan's slender fingers dancing across the strings, disturbing the river's calm waters. The pipa's crisp notes rang out like pearls scattering across the floor.

As Situ Jin's shout resounded through the pavilion, the drunken patrons sprang into action. Pushing away the women in their arms, they drew sharp goose-quill sabers they'd concealed beneath their robes. In unison, they threw grappling hooks to snag the curved railings of the second floor, allowing them to ascend swiftly. They discarded their robes, revealing black uniforms beneath.

Windows shattered as Eastern Depot officers broke through them; wooden splinters flew as doors and doorframes gave way. The assassins spun to face the officers, their three-foot-long blades clashing against the golden goose-quill sabers. Sparks flew with each strike, like clear water spraying.

The room filled with the cacophony of footsteps, clashing blades, tearing flesh, and women's screams as they plunged into the water. In the moonlit darkness, everyone moved—everyone but Shen Jue. As he gazed into the infinite starlight reflected on the rippling river's surface, Xiahou Lian's eyes flashed through his mind. Suddenly, he felt emptiness—hollow, aching emptiness.

He suddenly understood why Xiahou Lian had once struggled to accept Shen Jue's decision to serve a corrupt master, stubbornly insisting he should retake the imperial exams. But fate was cruel; no one escaped or avoided its grasp.

Outside, the music shifted again—the pipa's rhythm sped up, and Shen Jue could almost hear thousands of troops crossing the river.

Dark-clad assassins suddenly emerged from beneath the water, each wearing a white porcelain mask. The masks had hollow black eye sockets but no noses or mouths, so the wearers resembled faceless ghosts. As they climbed aboard, the Eastern Depot officers lying in wait to one side below the bridge leapt out. Blades flashed and blood sprayed. The assassins barely set foot on the ship before they were gutted, falling back into the Qinhuai River one after another. A stream of dark blood mixed with the black water, stretching into a ribbon that resembled a courtesan's fluttering crimson silk.

"Light the lamps!" Situ Jin barked.

At his command, officers relit the candles, illuminating the private room once more. Finally, Shen Jue saw the scene clearly. The window screens were in tatters. Officers stood silently with blades at the ready. Three assassins had been subdued; one was missing an arm. In the adjacent room, Gao Nian lay on the floor, a dagger in his chest. Blood gushed from the wound along the grooves of the blade.

“Go after the pipa player,” Shen Jue ordered coldly. “She’s a sheath!”

A black tide of officers surged from the room into the water. Seeing that, the woman on the boat abandoned her pipa and dove into the river. However, she was no match for the officers, and her dark-red blood soon spread across the river’s surface.

On the ground, an ashen Gao Nian groaned, his hands groping weakly at the floor. In truth, his cover had been blown long ago, and Qiye Garden had offered him a fortune to lure Shen Jue out. The desperate outlaws couldn’t grasp that some things in the world were more important than life itself—and for Gao Nian, those things were firmly in Shen Jue’s grasp.

Situ Jin clasped the man’s hand and asked softly, “Is there anything else we can do for you?”

“I…I did my duty… My wife, my children, my mother…”

“They will be cared for. The depot chief will look after them,” Situ Jin reassured him firmly.

Gao Nian nodded weakly. “Xiahou Lian…Xiahou Lian has a maid. Her name is Zhaoye… She’s incredibly strong, and she never leaves Xiahou’s side… Depot Chief…you must be careful.”

Shen Jue's heart jolted, and he couldn't help but ask sharply, "A maid?"

But Gao Nian was already gone. His mouth moved soundlessly, and his eyes dimmed to empty hollows as his lifeless head slumped to the side.

Shen Jue grabbed one of the assassins by the collar. "What maid?" he demanded coldly. "Tell me everything, or I'll kill you."

The man had a gaunt face and sharp eyes; he regarded Shen Jue with a venomous snake's icy gaze. Ignoring the question, he murmured, "Chief of the Eastern Depot, your name has been inscribed in the Garden's book of lives. Qiye Garden will remember you."

A chilling smile crept onto Shen Jue's lips. Shen Wenxing, who stood nearby, shivered involuntarily at the sight. Shen Jue rarely smiled; when he did, either he was on guard, or someone was about to face great misfortune.

"Not going to talk?" Shen Jue exuded an icy aura as he stood, his face partially veiled in the flickering lamplight. "Isn't Fang Cunzheng still short on people? We gave him the azaleas, but he keeps asking for more test subjects affected by Seven Fifteen. We've already sent him a few Garden informants we captured, but I hear they didn't survive the ordeal."

"That's not quite true," Shen Wenxing interjected. "They're not dead; they've just lost all their senses—and they're just bleeding from every orifice."

"Good," Shen Jue said coolly. "Send him these three as well."

"And the assassins outside?"

"Only these three are from Qiye Garden. The rest are just agents. Sending three such blades to kill me is quite the compliment," Shen Jue said with a mirthless laugh.

Officers dragged the assassins away as instructed, and the room fell silent. No one dared move until Shen Jue spoke. He stood alone in the shifting lamplight, lost in thought. Shen Wenxing glanced around and gave Situ Jin a meaningful look, but Situ Jin ignored him.

“Situ,” Shen Jue said suddenly. “If Zhu Mingyue changed—if she became someone you didn’t recognize—what would you do?”

“That would never happen,” replied Situ Jin.

“I’m asking hypothetically,” Shen Jue said, impatient. “What if she did?”

Firmly, Situ Jin replied, “I meant that Mingyue is my wife. However much she changes, I’ll still recognize her.”

Chapter 43:
Willow Tips

THE CHARCOAL FIRE ROARED, and a kettle of wine was warming on a heated brick bed. Several disheveled men sat around the fire, drinking wine and eating beef. They were wandering travelers of the jianghu who'd stopped to rest at a mountain inn. The old innkeeper, an honest, kind man, had offered them a pot of wine to warm themselves. The winter wine was murky and as thin as water, but it was better than nothing.

"Hey, have you read the latest volume of *The Garden Ghost Registry*?" one man asked.

"Of course," replied a slightly heavier man. "They added the up-and-comer Wuminggui—and they ranked twenty-seven famous Garden blades. Kinnara's Qiushui is first on the list."

"Shana should be at the top, if you ask me," the first man said. "Last month, its owner destroyed the Ghost of Mount Hei's lair. He cut someone down with every step he took. After ten strides, the den was awash with blood. They say it flowed all the way from Mount Hei straight down the Heishui River. The villagers downstream who'd gone to wash their clothes got home and found that everything was stained red!"

"Why not Hengbo? It's always been wielded by one of the Garden's top assassins—first the Garuda, and now the Wuminggui. Wasn't there news just yesterday that the Wuminggui took out another unlucky bastard?"

"The Wuminggui? He's nothing without Zhaoye by his side. Without her, he'd be nowhere as formidable," another man scoffed, picking his

teeth. With a mysterious expression, he added, “I hear she’s absolutely gorgeous, almost unearthly. A good friend of mine got lucky and caught a glimpse of her, and gods—her looks, her charm—she’s practically a goddess descended to the mortal realm!”

“I can’t understand why Zhaoye follows the Wuminggui. Someone said she was originally engaged to Tang Shiqi, but the Wuminggui took her away and forced Tang Shiqi to become his lackey.”

The other man clicked his tongue. “No way. If I were Tang Shiqi, I’d grab a blade and take care of that Wuminggui myself. Who’d dare to walk all over *me* like that?!”

The rowdy travelers ended up rousing a man lying in one corner to sleep, wrapped in a blanket. The travelers were in high spirits, proclaiming that a single night with Zhaoye would be worth death at the Wuminggui’s hands.

“Zhaoye is no beauty,” the man in the corner said softly.

Though his voice was quiet, everyone heard and turned to look at him. One traveler sat boldly beside him, wine cup in hand. “What? You’ve seen her?”

The man nodded.

“Impossible! My friend wouldn’t lie to me. He said that her brows, her eyes, her cherry blossom lips all practically belong to a fox spirit. One glance, and she’ll steal your soul!” the traveler shouted, puffed up with conviction.

“But…” The man began to tremble, his voice shaking. “But Zhaoye has no eyebrows, no eyes, and no mouth!”

As soon as he finished speaking, the inn's broken door flew open with great force. Blinding light shone in, making everyone squint. A slender girl stood in that light, her face obscured but her graceful silhouette visible. Wide sleeves covered her arms, and her hands hung at her sides.

A hoarse male voice called out from behind her. "The Wuminggui of Qiye Garden, here to send this gentleman to paradise!"

The girl suddenly moved, her arms crossing in front of her chest—but everyone saw now that her arms weren't arms but gleaming, icy blades! A moment later, they saw her face—no brows, no eyes, no mouth. It was a plain porcelain mask with two dark eyeholes.

A flash of light, and the girl leapt into the room.

"Zhaoye!" screamed the man wrapped in the blanket.

Everyone was terrified, scrambling for their weapons or to hide in the corners of the inn. The old innkeeper shielded his wife, who crouched behind the counter, trembling like a quail. The man in the blanket frantically dodged, drawing a long saber from his robes and slashing at Zhaoye's shoulder. She didn't evade, but stood her ground, taking the seemingly fatal blow head-on.

Clang.

The expected spray of blood never came; there was only the crisp chime of metal striking metal as the long blade collided with Zhaoye's shoulder and, astonishingly, chipped. The man's pupils contracted sharply.

Zhaoye remained expressionless, her hollow eye sockets fixed on the man as a dark glow rippled across her porcelain-white face. She raised her right arm, and a three-foot blade flashed downward in its place. The man

tried to evade, but it was too late—blood spurted like a fountain from his severed arm.

“Ah!” the man shrieked, dropping to the ground and writhing in agony. His severed right arm landed on the ground beside him with a thud, twitching a few times.

Zhaoye stopped moving. She stood silently in place, head lowered.

Someone tall entered the inn. His skin was dark, and a thin scar ran above his right eye. He was a rugged lone wolf of a man, his gaze full of unyielding ferocity and cold intensity. The travelers held their breath, a few daring to peek cautiously at the man.

The Wuminggui.

“Hello again, Gao, you bastard. Where would you like to try dying next?” Xiahou Lian pulled up a chair and sat, his legs crossed and his chin propped on his hand as he watched the trembling man on the floor. “You sure do know how to run, don’t you? You made me chase you like crazy from Hangzhou all the way to these godforsaken boondocks. My legs almost gave out!”

The man grabbed Xiahou Lian’s boot, leaving five bloody fingerprints. “Spare me! Sir, please spare me, I beg you! I have money—lots of money. If you spare me, you can have it all!”

Xiahou Lian smirked wickedly. “You can give me money to kill the person who bought your life, but your head’s already been purchased. I can’t let you keep it.”

“Fine! Fine!” The man struggled to sit up. “I’ll give you that money. Go kill the person who sent you for me!”

The man reached into his coat with his left hand. A flash of cold metal streaked across Xiahou Lian's vision, sharp as a blade slashing across his eyelid. Startled, Xiahou Lian instinctively stepped back, narrowly avoiding a short black arrow that grazed his arm and embedded itself in the wooden pillar behind him. With a glance at the arrow, Xiahou Lian turned his head, ruthlessness flickering in his eyes.

The man staggered to his feet, clutching his wounded arm as he stumbled outside, but Xiahou Lian caught up to him quickly. Grabbing him by the collar, the assassin shoved the man's face down into the smoldering coals heating the brick bed. The man's piercing screams filled the inn as the smell of roasting flesh permeated the air. The frightened travelers cowered in the corners, trembling.

Xiahou Lian freed his right hand and extended it to Zhaoye, then clenched his fist tightly. As he reached out, the sharp-eyed travelers saw sunlight reflect off fine threads that wrapped around Xiahou Lian's fingers and extended to Zhaoye's limbs. The threads were so thin that they were nearly invisible in the air, only glinting occasionally under direct sunlight.

It dawned on the astonished travelers that Zhaoye wasn't a woman at all—she was Xiahou Lian's mechanical puppet.

The threads trembled in the air like fluttering butterfly wings, and Zhaoye raised her bladelike arm, striking downward in a single, decisive motion. The man's head fell cleanly from his body, the flesh of his sliced neck left as smooth as a sawn wooden stump. His legs kicked feebly a few times before falling still. Xiahou Lian retrieved the head and placed it into a snakeskin bag hung around Zhaoye's neck.

“Horrible!” The old innkeeper wailed, crawling from beneath the counter to stare at the headless corpse. “Just horrible! When will the cycle of vengeance end? Young man, why take lives so recklessly? Why kill the innocent?!”

Xiahou Lian froze mid-step at the threshold, turning just enough to cast a cold gaze at the old innkeeper. “You’re awfully quick to make flippant remarks, old man,” Xiahou Lian growled through gritted teeth. “If your wife were murdered, and your daughter violated, would you still spout nonsense about the cycle of vengeance?”

The innkeeper stood stunned for a moment before furiously cursing Xiahou Lian, uttering things like “heartless wretch” and “death by a thousand cuts.” Xiahou Lian ignored the insults, mounting his horse alongside Zhaoye and disappearing into the distance.

The evening glow blanketed the sky over the endlessly rolling mountains, making it look like the heavens were ablaze. The fiery splendor reached the earth, where vibrant azaleas bloomed along the slopes like radiant flames burning to the valley below. Riding through the mountains, Xiahou Lian appeared from afar to be galloping through an infinite sea of fire.

Twenty-one-year-old Xiahou Lian had braved trials of fire and blade, like the other Qiye Garden assassins, to become the infamous Wuminggui. Chiyan had been right—swordplay didn’t suit him. After training for nearly a year at the villa in Liuzhou and killing dozens of Jingdao Villa disciples, Xiahou Lian had become so feared in Liuzhou City that his name alone silenced children crying at night. Yet he made little significant progress and barely lasted seven moves facing Chiyan.

Meanwhile, Liu Guicang's reputation soared to new heights. He bribed Garden assassins to kill the Northern sect's patriarch, securing Jingdao Villa's dominance and establishing himself as the undisputed leader of the jianghu. He gathered disciples, set up branch lodges, and claimed to uphold justice by mediating disputes between clans. More audaciously, he captured outlaw martial artists and sentenced them to death on a chopping block, inviting the entire martial alliance to witness the decapitations.

All those accomplishments were founded on his feat four years earlier: slaying the Garuda.

For his part, Xiahou Lian had remained an invisible vermin lurking in the darkness. The only thing he could do was glare darkly at lofty, untouchable Liu Guicang.

With no choice but to seek another path, Xiahou Lian recalled the ingenious mechanisms of Tang Lan, a member of the Tang Clan who'd specialized not in swordplay but in mechanical crafts. Xiahou Lian had exhumed Tang Lan and discovered his mechanical notes, *The Heavenly Craft Manual*, in the coffin. The manual detailed Tang Clan mechanisms and the long-lost Garden technique of Qianji Thread.

Tang Lan had defected to the Garden from the Tang Clan, driven by his desire to reintroduce Qianji Thread. Unfortunately, he hadn't succeeded. Still, his time with the Garden provided him great insights: He rediscovered the process for forging Qianji Thread, uncovered the Thousand-Thread Web Array, and recorded Qianji puppeteering techniques. Nevertheless, he failed to find a key ingredient needed for Qianji Thread—a mineral he only sketched the surface of, not naming it outright. Without all the components to make it, Qianji Thread remained unattainable.

In his efforts to master mechanical techniques, Xiahou Lian rescued Tang Shiqi, who was being escorted to Liu Guicang's chopping block for exploiting multiple women and denying that he'd fathered three unborn children. Xiahou Lian then disguised himself as Tang Shiqi and infiltrated the Tang Clan to copy their mechanical diagrams while Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing assisted him from outside. Slowly, they smuggled out the clan's books. Though they were eventually discovered, their efforts bore fruit—Xiahou Lian found a substitute for the original mineral in Qianji Thread.

That said, Xiahou Lian's Qianji Thread paled in comparison to the historical version. Genuine Qianji Thread could cut effortlessly through metal; Xiahou Lian's was only sharp enough to slice tofu. Useless as a weapon, it could still control puppets that could do the killing instead. And so Xiahou Lian and Tang Shiqi collaborated to craft a peerless killing machine: Zhaoye.

Four years had passed since his mother's death, and Xiahou Lian's patience was wearing thin. He wondered if it was perhaps time to head to Liuzhou. As the towns he passed grew closer together, he placed a hood over Zhaoye's head.

They arrived at Jinling's Wanxiang Tower just after sunset. The attendant recognized Xiahou Lian's horse and hurried forward to assist him, lifting Zhaoye down from the saddle.

"Lian-ge, you're back!" the attendant said. "Where should we send your bounty this time? To the bank, or back to the Garden?"

"To the bank," Xiahou Lian said, tossing him the horsewhip.

"Understood." The attendant bowed and smiled. "How long will you stay this time, sir? Tonight will be lively. A new girl, Liushao-er, is making

her debut. Mama Xiangnu trained her personally, and she can sing, play instruments, and even compose poetry. Why don't you take her as your first? If you want her, just say the word. The madam would never refuse you."

"No." With that blunt rejection, Xiahou Lian lifted the curtain and stepped inside.

The sweet, cloying scent of cosmetics filled his nose. A red octagonal lantern hung every few feet; the lanterns' soft glow cast a seductive hue on the women's faces and skin. The drifting laughter of men and women surrounded him, and in the main hall couples sat intertwined, drinking and flirting.

One woman recognized Xiahou Lian and approached, smiling sweetly. He frowned and sidestepped her. Seeing his cold, aloof expression, she hesitated, not daring to get closer.

"Are you sure you don't want her?" asked the attendant. "I've seen this girl before—she's stunning, even more beautiful than Madam Xiangnu in her youth. You're a grown man now, and it's time to find a woman to warm your bed—someone to care for you. Wouldn't that be better than loneliness? Don't worry, no one will touch her while you're away. She'll serve only you. If you ever tire of her, you can sell her off."

"I said no," Xiahou Lian repeated impatiently. "Where are my brother and the others?"

"O-on the second floor," the servant stammered. "They're here for Liushao-er's debut tonight."

"Fine. Get lost," Xiahou Lian said, turning toward the backyard. He walked through the building, past red silk curtains and entwined couples,

dodging the women who tried to press themselves against him. He passed the pond and spirit screen, then continued down the hallway, finally reaching his room in the backyard. There, he stepped inside and closed the door.

The pain in his abdomen hit him like a tidal wave, burning like fire. He'd sustained the injury while assassinating Gao in Hangzhou, and he hadn't had time to properly treat it before chasing after his target.

Xiahou Lian removed his shirt, revealing a chiseled, muscular body bruised and riddled with scars—sword wounds, saber slashes, and arrow piercings. They practically formed a pattern, and there wasn't an inch of unblemished skin. A faint red line also stretched across his waist, like ink bleeding on rice paper.

Gritting his teeth, Xiahou Lian ripped off the fake skin he'd used to cover the wound, nearly passing out from the excruciating pain. Time had been so tight that he'd slapped on the artificial skin and left, thinking it would stop the bleeding. Now, he was paying the price. By the time he finished applying medicine and dressing the wound, he was drenched in sweat. He wiped himself down, put fresh clothes on, and opened the door.

The moon hung high in the sky. Grabbing a jug of wine, Xiahou Lian went to the riverside to cool off in the night breeze. The curved balustrade looked like something from a painting, and the sound of a zither drifted from a small boat in the middle of the river.

Tang Shiqi approached him with a grin. "Hey, boss, why are you out here drinking alone? Aren't you going to watch the debut of your building's new girl?"

Tang Shiqi was a round-faced man who looked seventeen or eighteen but was closer to Xiahou Lian's age. With his charming appearance and silver tongue, he was popular with young girls and married women alike. Beyond that, however, his skills were limited. After fleeing the Tang Clan, he'd squandered his money and resorted to living off women. Alas, he overdid it, couldn't cover his tracks, and ultimately fell into Liu Guicang's hands. Fortunately, Xiahou Lian had been passing by and saved his life. Tang Shiqi had since turned over a new leaf, and he now restricted himself to enjoying theaters and brothels.

"Sounds boring. Not interested," Xiahou Lian said, sipping his wine. The chilly night wind made him shiver.

"I say, you and your brother seem very determined to live like monks. Your brother's a fool, so that makes sense for him, but you—don't tell me you spend your nights pleasuring yourself with Zhaoye?"

Xiahou Lian glared sidelong at him, then turned his gaze to the dark river.

Suddenly, a distant pleasure boat erupted in noise. Xiahou Lian looked over and watched as more than a dozen Qiye Garden agents emerged from the water like ghosts to swarm the boat. Just as quickly, more men appeared beneath the boat's railings, swinging their blades and forcing the attackers back into the water.

"Who's the Garden targeting on that boat?" asked Xiahou Lian.

Tang Shiqi shrugged. "Don't ask questions. Kill without restraint. You're a Garden assassin, and you don't know, so why would I?"

Xiahou Lian watched for a while longer, but the boat was too far away to see clearly. Still, it was clear that the entire vessel was in chaos. He

wondered whether the target was from the jianghu or the imperial court.

He couldn't help but think of Shen Jue. That kid had turned out much more successful than Xiahou Lian; he was now the head of the Eastern Depot, a powerful eunuch second only to Wei De, biding his time until the day when he could finally topple Wei De and claim the top seat for himself.

If Xiahou Lian had Shen Jue's intelligence or Chiyan's swordsmanship, he wouldn't still be struggling to kill Liu Guicang. But in the end, he was just a useless piece of trash.

"Tang Shiqi, I'm planning to assassinate Liu Guicang next month," he said suddenly.

Tang Shiqi looked stunned.

Xiahou Lian patted his shoulder. "Will you be my sheath?"

"You're not going to wait until you master Qianji Thread?"

"No. Zhaoye will be enough."

"If you end up at his mercy, I'm not going to save you."

"That's fine. Don't save me," Xiahou Lian said. He lifted the curtain and stepped back inside.

Tang Shiqi watched the departing figure of the assassin known for his ruthlessness and mercilessness. Despite walking through a brightly lit den of indulgence, he seemed completely out of place, radiating desolation and melancholy.

In a private seat on the second floor, a young man dressed like a scholar leaned over the railing and looked down. He wore a bamboo-silk jacket with a front clasp and had a silver flute at his waist. Seeing Xiahou Lian, the young man called out, "Shige!"

Xiahou Lian nodded in acknowledgment.

Chiyan sat on a stool, fiddling with a Kongming lock.[16] He never tired of playing with childish toys; he had kept a collection of giant kites at his hut on Heimianfo, and when he traveled down the mountain, his hands were always fiddling with a red flower bracelet or interlocking rings. When he could, he'd spend his entire day playing.

Shu Qing—the final disciple of the Kinnara, Qiu Ye—was destined to inherit the Qiu surname and be renamed Qiu Qing. Qiu-shifu originally intended for Xiahou Lian to take the Qiu surname, but Xiahou Lian had stubbornly refused. In the end, Qiu-shifu had to take Shu Qing as his disciple to preserve the Qiu family line. Like Qiu Ye, Shu Qing had a gentle temperament. At first glance, he looked less like an assassin with countless victims and more like a bookish intellectual who'd toil over his scrolls beneath a freezing window. Tang Shiqi always called him "Scholar," and he lived up to the nickname, frequently copying passages from *The Book of Songs* and poring over them. His knowledge of literature and the classics far surpassed that of Xiahou Lian and the others.

Shu Qing's face lit up with excitement. "Look, Shige. Isn't Miss Liushao beautiful?"

Xiahou Lian glanced down offhandedly. In the middle of the main hall sat a young woman dressed in a moon-white ruqun, her demeanor gentle and quiet, her head slightly bowed. All of Wanxiang Tower was abuzz, whistles rang out, and people tossed red silk handkerchiefs her way. Only Xiahou Lian and Chiyan remained indifferent.

"Whoa—she's stunning!" Tang Shiqi craned his neck for a better view.

“Ignorance,” Xiahou Lian sneered. *That’s all she has? She doesn’t even compare to one of Shen Jue’s fingers.*

“She just asked us to write a flower-themed poem using rhymes for ‘you.’ The one who writes the best verse wins the right to be her first customer,” Shu Qing said.

“Did you write one?” Xiahou Lian asked.

Shu Qing nodded enthusiastically. Xiahou Lian patted his shoulder in a show of encouragement. *The poor, naive kid has probably never even seen a woman before*.

Below, the madam began reciting the submitted verses. Xiahou Lian’s mind was elsewhere, and he caught only one line: “When will the misty rains of Jiangdong cease? Beyond the railings, green hills; beneath the walkway roof, white hair.” The words were so cloying, his skin crawled. The madam clutched the little slip of paper, her face crinkling into a grin as she turned to the private booth where Xiahou Lian sat. Tang Shiqi shook Shu Qing’s arm excitedly. Shu Qing clutched his chest, his face a picture of nervous anticipation.

Clearing her throat, the madam cried out shrilly. “Congratulations to Xiahou Lian! Master Xiahou, you have won the lady’s favor, and tonight you’ll share her bridal chamber!”

Xiahou Lian nearly fell out of his chair.

“I submitted it under your name, Shige,” Shu Qing told him in a small voice.

Xiahou Lian glared at him furiously. “Are you insane?!”

Tang Shiqi roared with laughter. “He gets you a girl for free, and you’re still not happy?!”

“My name sounds too effeminate,” stammered a flustered Shu Qing.

“And the boss’s name isn’t? ‘Lian’ calls to mind *rippling* crimson lips and a clove-scented tongue! Oh my!” Tang Shiqi teased in a singsong tone.

Xiahou Lian hurled a teacup at him. “Get lost, you idiot!”

Tang Shiqi dodged. Turning to Shu Qing, he asked, “Why didn’t you use *my* name?”

Xiahou Lian sneered. “You have the name of some small-time thug out to pick pockets.”

Shu Qing silently nodded in agreement.

The small-time thug said nothing.

Chapter 44:
No Way Back

OF COURSE, Xiahou Lian had no intention of bedding Liushao-er.

He paid the fee in silver, arranged the wedding banquet, and bought the requisite dowry items—trunks, jewelry, clothes, everything. Then he stuffed Shu Qing into the wedding robes, held him by the ear, and kicked him into the bridal chamber.

Seeing this, the madam nearly lost her mind. “Sir, what are you doing?” she scolded him. “You write verses to charm the girl, and now you just toss someone else in there in your stead?”

Xiahou Lian shot her a glare. “Open your damned eyes! Do I look like the kind of guy who’d write that sappy crap? Give me a break. Your rule was that whoever *wrote* the poem got to enter the bridal chamber. Are you seriously going to break your own rule?”

“Th-this is…!” The madam stomped her foot in frustration. “You’re throwing away a treasure! Liushao-er is a pure, untainted girl handpicked from Yangzhou by Mama Xiangnu! From head to toe, she’s flawless!” She pulled Xiahou Lian aside and lowered her voice. “You don’t understand what you’re rejecting! The girl doesn’t know about the Garden. The elders arranged that for you out of consideration, hoping that you’d want to settle down as part of an ordinary couple. She’d stay here at Wanxiang Tower, and when you were tired, you could rest here too, just like any married man outside. Wouldn’t that arrangement be perfect?”

Some old bastard in the Garden must be meddling in his business; no wonder she was so eager to play matchmaker. “Pass. I don’t have time for your little games,” Xiahou Lian said, rolling his eyes.

Inside the bridal chamber, Shu Qing stood frozen by the door like a guardian statue, then belatedly realized he should move. He straightened the crumpled wedding robes Xiahou Lian had wrestled him into and shuffled forward.

Liushao-er sat primly on the carved bed, hands neatly folded on her lap, knees together, a red veil covering her face. Shu Qing hovered near the partition, unsure what to do next.

He’d had his own selfish reasons for writing the poem.

He’d known for some time that the Garden elders had chosen Liushao-er for his shige. It was an open secret in Qiye Garden that the abbot was Xiahou Lian’s father. The two rarely interacted, but blood ties couldn’t be ignored, and the abbot wouldn’t really leave Xiahou Lian to fend for himself.

Shu Qing had first seen Liushao-er a month earlier, when Mama Xiangnu brought her in. Mama Xiangnu had noticed his dazed expression and warned him to nip any romantic ideas in the bud. But ultimately, those ideas hadn’t died. Instead, like seeds blown into soil, they’d taken root and grown until they consumed him.

Liushao-er was the most stunning maiden Shu Qing had ever seen. One day, while returning from the Confucius Temple with a large kite Chiyan had wanted, he’d noticed her from afar—a girl in a ky-blue jacket, her face as smooth as fine porcelain, delicately tilting her head as she listened to Madam Xiangnu’s instructions.

It was common now for an assassin to keep a woman in a Garden-affiliated brothel or safehouse; the assassin would rest there when they weren't on the job or back at the Garden. In those dreamlike moments, they could almost pretend to be ordinary men leading simple lives of daytime work and nighttime rest. As long as they registered with Qiye Garden and remained under surveillance, the Garden turned a blind eye.

But how could someone like Shu Qing's shige cherish a woman? Xiahou Lian's hands knew only swords, puppet strings, and the workings of mechanical puppets like Zhaoye. What did he know of painting brows or applying rouge?

Liushao-er would never have been happy with Xiahou Lian. It was fine, Shu Qing told himself. His shige didn't care anyway.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted the jeweled curtain and sat beside Liushao-er. Gently, he raised her veil. She kept her head slightly lowered, and her profile was just as he remembered—that of a delicate budding flower.

When she looked up and saw Shu Qing, surprise flickered in her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Shu Qing rubbed his knees awkwardly. "Uh, well… Xiahou—"

"—rejected me?"

"No, no! I mean—well, yes, but—"

"Did you write that poem? 'When will the misty rains of Jiangdong cease? Beyond the railing, green hills; beneath the walkway roof, white hair.'"

Shu Qing nodded, his face red.

Liushao-er smiled, her eyes curving into twin crescents; each perfectly resembled the moon high above the willows. “I knew it couldn’t have been that Xiahou Lian. How could a brute like him write something so delicate?”

“He’s rough around the edges, but he has finer points,” Shu Qing said, picking at a loose thread on the embroidery of his robe. “He’s a great cook. I can’t cook anything.”

“You’re the groom now, yet you’re talking *him* up,” Liushao-er teased, sticking out her tongue. “Didn’t the madam want me to marry him? Despite the fact that, somehow, I’ve ended up with you.”

Shu Qing was too embarrassed to speak. After a long pause, he said, “He…he doesn’t want to settle down. He has other things to do.”

“I’m so glad it’s you!” Liushao-er looked delighted. “The madam discreetly pointed him out to me the last time he was here. She went on and on about how handsome and strong he was, insisting he’d treat me well. But…have you seen him? He’s so intimidating—he looks like some villain! Back in Yangzhou, I was close with an older girl who was sold to someone from the jianghu. Guess what happened to her?”

Shu Qing looked at Liushao-er curiously.

“After a few days, she came running back. She was disheveled and crying, begging the madam to take her in again. When she took off her clothes to show everyone, her body was covered in bruises—there wasn’t a patch of unmarked skin! The buyer from the jianghu was a drunk, and when he drank, he’d beat women!”

“Xiahou Lian isn’t like that!” Shu Qing protested. “He never hits women for no reason!”

“You can’t judge a person by their appearance alone,” Liushao-er continued. “In the end, they forced Jiejie to go back. There was no other choice—the man had paid for her, so she belonged to him. That day, I swore to myself that I’d never marry someone from the jianghu. All that fighting and killing—it’s terrifying. The ideal husband would be someone like you—a scholar. How wonderful that would be! Perhaps you’ll pass the imperial exams some day, and I’ll become the wife of an official!”

“I…” Shu Qing was stunned; he’d never expected Liushao-er to have such thoughts. “But I—”

“The madam said I’m beautiful enough to keep Xiahou Lian’s attention. But she’s completely wrong. A man like Xiahou Lian would never stay in a woman’s bed. The only things that can truly hold his attention are blades and blood. Women like me may be called ‘flowers of Pingkang’ or ‘treasures of Qinhuai,’ but in truth, we’re just prostitutes—no better than dirt in his eyes.” Liushao-er looked at Shu Qing steadily, her gaze like a river’s gentle ripples under spring rain. “You’d never treat me like that, would you?”

Shu Qing stared into her eyes and felt them pull in his entire heart. His breathing grew rapid, and his mind went blank. She didn’t know that he was also an assassin from the jianghu.

Wondering whether to tell her, Shu Qing tugged at the loose thread on his knee. His head throbbed. Should he tell her or not? He glanced back at Liushao-er again. She was looking at him hopefully, her eyes shimmering like spring water.

In the end, he heard himself say, “I wouldn’t. Don’t worry.” His voice was faint, but clear enough.

Outside, the madam rushed to report the matter to Liu Xiangnu. Liu Xiangnu's hand trembled, and the eyebrow pencil she held slipped, leaving a long, jagged line.

After sending the madam away, Liu Xiangnu stepped from her room and knocked on another door. A man in black sat silently in the darkness.

Liu Xiangnu bowed her head. "You already knew?"

"Forget it. There's no love in his future. Let him be."

"But what about Shu Qing?" Liu Xiangnu asked softly. "Liushao-er isn't exactly the obedient type. Why would you choose a woman like that for Master Lian?"

"I wanted him to see that love is as illusory as a reflection on water, vanishing with the slightest touch—to see that the only thing he can truly depend on is the blade in his hand. But since he understands that already, let it be." The man in black sighed. "As for Shu Qing, it's time he grew up. If Qiu Ye can't be bothered, I'll have to guide him instead."

The next day, Xiahou Lian woke early. He walked to the riverside and looked up at the tower's rows of windows, their lattice patterns and thin curtains resembling the shadows of cut-outs. Shu Qing's room was still dark. After last night's festivities, he'd probably sleep until mid-morning.

Hands clasped behind his back, Xiahou Lian strolled a short distance. In the early morning, Qinhuai River was quiet and deserted, the usual hustle and bustle gone, leaving only clean white walls and blue tiles in sight. By a set of steps leading down to the water, a familiar figure crouched beside two large wooden basins, scrubbing clothes with great effort. Walking over, Xiahou Lian saw that it was Chiyan. The basins were full of women's

clothing—a pale-yellow jacket, bright-red silk pants, and even a few undergarments and dudou.

Xiahou Lian was speechless.

Simple-minded Chiyan did whatever he was told without question. The women in the building liked to tease him and often used him for free labor, as if wearing clothes he'd washed might turn them into celestial beings. In exchange for his work, the women gave him handkerchiefs and scarves. Xiahou Lian often returned to the tower to find Chiyan wearing a woman's scarf around his neck and carrying a large wooden basin to the riverside to do laundry.

That was just how he was. If you asked him to wash clothes, he would. If you asked him to kill, he would.

A black-clad corpse floated down the river, its water-swollen face unrecognizable. Only then did Xiahou Lian notice several corpse-collecting boats on the river. The pleasure boat from last night's fight was moored on the distant shore, awaiting repairs. Xiahou Lian didn't know the target of last night's assassination, but it was evident that the attempt had failed.

Chiyan waded into the water and pulled the corpse ashore. The waterlogged body was surprisingly heavy, so Xiahou Lian lent a hand, grabbing the corpse's shoulders. Together, they hauled it onto the bank.

"I've seen him before," Chiyan said. "He's a base-keeper from the Garden. I bought crab-roe buns from his stall a few days ago."

Chiyan pulled a pink pouch—clearly a gift from one of the women in the building—from his belt, removed a candied pine nut, and placed it in the dead man's palm. "Do you want one?" he asked.

Xiahou Lian shook his head. "Eat them yourself."

Chiyan put the pouch away and kept washing clothes.

Xiahou Lian watched as another corpse was dredged from the water. “Don’t tell the women about the bodies in the river,” he said to Chiyan.

Chiyan looked up, confused.

“Just don’t say anything,” Xiahou Lian insisted.

Nodding, Chiyan resumed wringing out the clothes and placing them into a dry basin.

“I hear the old bastard summoned you back to the mountain.”

Chiyan nodded. “The abbot wants me to go to the Oirats and kill one of their leaders.” His expression was impassive, as if traveling thousands of miles was as mundane as stepping forward one pace.

“Chiyan, isn’t there anything you want to do just for yourself?”

Chiyan paused. “Yes,” He lowered his eyes, his long lashes fluttering like butterfly wings. “I want to do what you and the abbot want done.”

His words caught Xiahou Lian off guard. “But what about yourself? I mean, *just* you.”

“We have the same face, the same blood, and the same heart,” Chiyan said softly. “You’re another version of me in this world, so what you want to do *is* what I want to do—what I want for myself.”

“What about the abbot?”

“The abbot is good to me—like a master and like a father,” Chiyan said, as if it were the clearest thing in the world.

Xiahou Lian felt a surge of resentment. The old man clearly saw Chiyan as nothing more than a weapon, but Chiyan was oblivious. Suppressing his anger, he asked, “How is he good to you?”

Chiyan turned his head to gaze at the blue-tiled roofs and white walls of the riverside houses, and at the black-canopied boats on the water. “Xiao-Lian, I know you hate the Garden and killing—but I don’t. There’s actually no difference between the mountain and the world below. We all have so little—a pouch of candied pine nuts, a few bags of silver, or maybe a pretty courtyard. Yes, everyone has very little—but everyone wants to take something from others. Merchants want others’ money, officials want others’ power, and the Garden wants others’ lives. Everybody’s the same. Why spurn it?”

“It’s not the same…”

“Liu Guicang wanted the Garuda’s life, and now you want his. There’s no difference,” Chiyan said, taking Xiahou Lian’s hand. “But I like the abbot; he gave me kites and taught me to wield a blade. And you’re Xiao-Lian. The moment we met, I knew you were another me, the opposite of me. I like you, Xiao-Lian.”

Xiahou Lian looked into Chiyan’s large, dark eyes. They reflected the shifting light of the sky and clouds—as well as Xiahou Lian himself. A bitter taste filled his mouth, as if he’d eaten an unripe walnut. He lowered his head and squeezed Chiyan’s hand. “I understand. I like you too, Chiyan.”

“Oh, my goodness! What a moving moment of brotherly love! I’m almost in tears!” Tang Shiqi’s teasing voice sang out from behind them.

Xiahou Lian snapped a branch from a tree and swung it backward without looking. Tang Shiqi dodged with a laugh. Shu Qing ran over to join them, his face glowing with happiness.

Tang Shiqi slung an arm around Shu Qing's shoulders. "Oh, so you finally got out of bed? How was your first night, Sir Scholar? Was it *heavenly*?"

Shu Qing's face visibly reddened.

"Shut up," Xiahou Lian said, pulling Shu Qing over. He took a stack of banknotes from his pocket and handed them to Shu Qing. "I'm your shige. That makes me your elder when Shifu's not around. Take this money. A man needs to stand on his own two feet, and the madam says the girl doesn't know about our background. Ease her into it—don't bring up the Garden; just tell her you're wanted for murder, and if she sticks by you, bring her home and build a life together. I'll have the boys put up a house for you near Shifu's place. That'll be more convenient."

Shu Qing tearily accepted the banknotes.

Xiahou Lian patted his shoulder. "That girl's had a hard life. Treat her well, you hear me? If she doesn't want to be with you, let her be. Just give her the money, and don't make a nuisance of yourself."

Shu Qing nodded silently.

"Hey, boss! If I get married someday, will I get that much money?" Tang Shiqi asked, practically drooling over Shu Qing's stack of banknotes.

"No, what you'll get is a fat slap across the face," Xiahou Lian said, clasping his hands behind his back as he walked away. "All right, Shiqi and I are heading out. Shu Qing, you stay put, and don't go stirring up trouble."

Shu Qing grabbed his arm. "I'm coming to Liuzhou with you, Shige! Liushao-er was supposed to be your bride, and I stole her. Let me make it up to you."

Xiahou Lian was speechless for a moment. “What the hell are you talking about? ‘Make it up to me’ my ass. Stay put or go back to the Garden.”

“No. I’m coming with you. If you won’t let me fight by your side, I’ll be your sheath alongside Shiqi-ge.” Shu Qing turned to Chiyan. “Are you coming, Chiyan-ge?”

Chiyan shook his head. “I’m returning to the Garden.”

Having Chiyan with them would greatly improve their odds, but Shu Qing knew Xiahou Lian was dead set on killing Liu Guicang himself and didn’t press the matter. Instead, he stubbornly insisted on being Xiahou Lian’s second sheath no matter what. He clung to Xiahou Lian like a shadow, dogging his every step until Xiahou Lian finally relented out of sheer exasperation. Before they departed, Shu Qing bid Liushao-er farewell at Tongji Gate. They engaged in a soulful, lingering exchange reminiscent of the wistful partings seen only in poetry.

It was early spring. Willow tendrils unfurled over the riverbank, stretching toward the distant horizon like a curtain of jade. Porters and peddlers hauled their loads along the road, and the occasional official’s blue-canopied carriage rolled past. Xiahou Lian and Tang Shiqi squatted by the water’s edge, waiting for Shu Qing to finish his goodbyes.

“I can’t believe nobody came to break a willow branch for us in farewell,” Tang Shiqi griped, furiously fanning himself with a gilded sandalwood fan. “Do they realize you might not return?”

Xiahou Lian ignored him, staring at their reflections in the river—one figure morose and dejected, the other frosty and impassive, like a pair of stray mutts with no home to return to.

“The bottom line is that I’m the guy known as the ‘Shen Jue of Bashu,’ so where’s *my* send-off?” Tang Shiqi grumbled.

“‘The Shen Jue of Bashu’? What the hell is that?”

“You don’t know? Supposedly, the chief of the Eastern Depot is an unearthly beauty. Some claim he rose through the ranks on looks alone, first catching Wei De’s favor and then the emperor’s eye. But at the end of the day, I’d say he’s just a brownnosing bootlicker—how else could he climb so high?” Tang Shiqi heaved a theatrical sigh. “And here I am, Tang Shiqi, being overshadowed by some damn eunuch the same age as me! It’s infuriating!”

“Who’re you calling a damn eunuch, you Tang Clan reject?! Shut your mouth!” Xiahou Lian shoved the other young man’s head down. “Just look at this sniveling face of yours. You think *you* compare to Shen Jue?!”

“Speaking of Shen Jue, you’d better be careful.” Tang Shiqi tossed a pebble into the water, its splash sending ripples across the surface. “Word is that he already rooted out all your undercover agents in the capital and dragged them to the Eastern Depot—and not a single one has come back. Now, he’s hunting down Garden assassins everywhere. Didn’t some poor bastard fall into his clutches just the other day?”

Tang Shiqi was right. The Garden had recently suffered a major blow: Eastern Depot agents were hunting down agents and assassins everywhere, capturing them and throwing them into the depot prison. It was said that those who entered that place never came out alive—and when it came to Garden prisoners, not even their corpses made it out. There was no helping it; the Garden was an outlaw faction in the jianghu, and they’d

killed a number of Eastern Depot agents. Who would the Eastern Depot target if not them?

Xiahou Lian sighed. He wondered if Shen Jue remembered him after all these years. If Xiahou Lian ended up imprisoned by the Eastern Depot, could he beg Shen Jue to let him go?

Just then, two prison carts rumbled out of the city gate. They were packed with ragged, emaciated prisoners with their heads hanging low—and their escorts weren't government soldiers, but disciples from Jingdao Villa.

Xiahou Lian stood, his gaze growing colder by the second.

Tang Shiqi shivered. He'd been in one of those prison carts before. The disciples of Jingdao Villa enjoyed tormenting prisoners. In the wilderness, when no one was around to see, they tied prisoners to the backs of horses and dragged them along.

Grabbing Xiahou Lian's sleeve, he urged, "Calm down, boss! Don't do anything rash! Hey—what are the authorities even doing, letting Liu Guicang and his men run wild as vigilantes?"

"He's got officials in his pocket. Besides, he arrests folks like us—no household registration, but criminal records for days. The officials probably thank him for it."

More and more onlookers gathered, pointing and whispering.

"Did you hear about Master Liu from Jingdao Villa? He got cuckolded again!" someone murmured.

"I did!" another onlooker replied. "His actual wife—the one he legally married—was cheating with one of his guards. His three sons weren't even his! Rumor has it that he drowned her in a pond and hunted

down the bastard sons. The villa tried to keep it quiet, but word got out somehow, and now the whole jianghu's talking about it!"

"There's no way he's escaping the cuckold label now. Honestly, the fault lies in his name—why would his parents give him a name with 'Gui'[17] in the first place?"

Tang Shiqi craned his neck to continue eavesdropping, then pulled back with a grin. "Ha! Cuckolded asshole. Who would take a known cuckold seriously when it comes to martial justice? I bet people secretly laugh at that cuckolded turtle behind his back every time he speaks! He'd be better off tucking his head into his shell and shutting the hell up."

Saying nothing, Xiahou Lian stared at his palm; just above it, Qianji Thread wrapped around his fingers.

Liu Guicang. He mouthed the name silently, gritting his teeth.

Chapter 45:
The Night's Return

XIAHOU LIAN DECIDED to carry out the assassination alone.

That decision met with complete opposition from Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing. The former insisted Xiahou Lian seek help from Garden agents or at least hire a few people to cover up the assassination, and the latter agreed.

Liu Guicang commanded three thousand disciples. Even if each of them just spat once at Xiahou Lian, they'd drown him. Assassins moved in the shadows, but they weren't gods or demons who possessed some art of invisibility. Leaving the slightest trace, or making any careless move, could betray their presence to watchful eyes.

Tang Shiqi spent a long time protesting, but Xiahou Lian remained utterly unmoved, as if no amount of ranting and raving could sway him.

At his wits' end, Tang Shiqi said, "Boss, if you can't pay my wages, just say so! Come clean. Are you trying to skip town because you racked up a mountain of debt gambling and whoring?!"

"Like hell! What—you think I act like *you*?" Xiahou Lian retorted, exasperated.

"Why not contact our undercover agents, then?" Shu Qing asked. "They could at least hold off Liu Guicang's lackeys for you. Wouldn't that make things easier?"

Xiahou Lian was silent for a moment before replying. "Right after my mother died, that old bald donkey of an abbot accepted Liu Guicang's money and sent assassins to murder the Northern sect's grandmaster on his

behalf. Asking undercover agents for help would be no different than asking a favor of that donkey himself."

Shu Qing was stunned. "But…" he blurted. After stammering for a while, though, he still couldn't come up with an adequate rebuttal.

"I can take Liu Guicang down by myself. I have Zhaoye and Hengbo. They'll be enough," Xiahou Lian said, his cold, resolute gaze leaving no room for argument.

Shu Qing wanted to keep trying to sway Xiahou Lian, but Tang Shiqi patted his shoulder, signaling him to let it go. Turning back to Xiahou Lian, Tang Shiqi asked, "So what's your plan?"

Xiahou Lian spread a map of Liuzhou on the table. On the left side, a crimson line stretched from the north market to the east gate and then continued straight out of the city. The vermilion ink of the line had soaked deep into the map's white felt fibers, at first resembling a fresh, gaping cut weeping blood.

Xiahou Lian tapped the main road in front of the east gate. "On the first and fifteenth of every month, Liu Guicang inspects his establishments in the city. He owns twenty-three—three restaurants, five cosmetics stores, ten herbal medicine shops, and five clinics. He usually starts his rounds after one in the afternoon, moving west to east. He spends anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes interrogating each shopkeeper. At seven, he dines at the Dexian Building in the eastern district, and around nine, he leaves through the east gate to return to his estate."

"The old cuckold really is stinking rich," Tang Shiqi said, clicking his tongue. "How many escorts does he tend to bring?"

“Fewer than ten. Sometimes he only brings two attendants,” Xiahou Lian replied. “Jingdao Villa has too many people, too many variables, to attempt an assassination there. Katana sabers are designed for military use—for coordinated combat and defense. Taking down one man is easy enough, but not a whole squad; they’d just swarm me from every direction the second I set foot inside the compound, and there’d be no clean exit. Better to ambush him outdoors. Zhaoye’s invulnerable to blades and spears, so fighting ten-on-one won’t be a problem for her.”

“Are you sure this will work?” Shu Qing asked, his heart full of unease. He knew his shige’s temperament.

Xiahou Lian was never one to consider consequences. When he decided to plunder the techniques of a hundred different saber arts, he’d vanished without a word, returning months later with dozens of stolen manuals—and a body covered in wounds. When he vowed to craft the ultimate killing machine—a mechanical puppet—he’d dragged Tang Shiqi into his room for assistance, and they’d foregone food and sleep until they produced Zhaoye. By the time he’d finished, he was bearded and unkempt, like a vagabond who’d spent decades living on the streets.

If Xiahou Lian drove himself to such extremes just to master saber techniques and craft puppets, Shu Qing had no doubt that he’d unblinkingly throw his life away to assassinate Liu Guicang.

“If the first strike fails, I’ll retreat immediately,” Xiahou Lian reassured him. “I already bought a street-facing shop by the east gate where you two can wait in case I need backup. And don’t worry, I’m not going to let anything happen to me before Liu Guicang is dead. I promise to survive long enough to finish him off.”

But what if you die with him? Shu Qing pursed his lips but didn't dare ask aloud.

After Xiahou Lian left, Shu Qing tugged Tang Shiqi's sleeve. "Shiqi-ge, are you really going to let my shige do this?"

Tang Shiqi smacked Shu Qing's head. "Don't be daft. Do you seriously think we're going to follow his instructions to the letter? We'll secretly hire a dozen or so of our own men to lie in ambush. If that mule-headed Xiahou really gets into trouble, all of us will rush out together and save him."

Xiahou Lian was already thoroughly prepared: He'd fitted Zhaoye with a new blade arm, scouted every brick and patch of soil in Liuzhou City, mapped out three escape routes, and prepared for dozens of contingencies. The assassination would be foolproof.

The only thing left to do was to wait. Wait until the first day of the following month, at nine in the evening, when Liu Guicang's carriage would rumble onto the main street toward the east gate—the killing ground Xiahou Lian had meticulously chosen for him.

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THE NIGHT WAS INK BLACK. Xiahou Lian sat atop the roof with a jug of wine at his side, savoring the breeze. He'd originally rented this courtyard during his days capturing Liu's disciples for saber practice, and he'd eventually bought the place outright, transforming it into his secret hideout.

From his vantage point, Xiahou Lian could see his troupe of humanoid puppets—crafted with Zhaoye as a prototype—standing in the moonlit courtyard below, their iron “skin” glinting faintly. Shu Qing had thoughtfully clothed each one, which made them resemble a row of stiff corpses when viewed from afar.

Discarded crossbow bolts and saber molds cluttered the hallways of the hideout. Here and there, the tattered blue cover of a Tang Clan mechanical manual could be spotted. Xiahou Lian used the rock garden for target practice, and the stone surfaces were now pockmarked with arrow holes, making them resemble the skin of a leper. In the corner, a magnolia tree stood amid the desolation like a lone soldier who’d broken through enemy lines. Plump white blossoms crowded its branches. At a glance, one might even mistake them for roosting doves.

As Tang Shiqi emerged from the covered walkway, Xiahou Lian called out to him. “Where’s the scholar?”

“Writing to his wife. Nauseating, lovey-dovey stuff—I peeked at a few lines. It was all sappy poetry.” Tang Shiqi climbed up to the roof and plopped down beside Xiahou Lian. “He’s still too green. You just have to spend a few ‘loving’ nights with a woman, then toss her some hairpins and bracelets. After that, she’ll stick to you like glue.”

Xiahou Lian didn’t respond. He didn’t understand these trivial matters. He’d sworn never to marry, nor to have children, so love or romance had nothing do with him.

Still, he knew exactly how to bully Tang Shiqi. “And then those women will report you to Jingdao Villa, land you on the chopping block, and almost get you killed.”

Tang Shiqi shot Xiahou Lian a glare. “That’s love turning to hate, all right?!”

Under the moonlight, Xiahou Lian’s gaunt face was almost pallid, his brows like bold strokes of ink slanting upward. Now that he’d relaxed, his demeanor was melancholy.

Tang Shiqi still recalled how Xiahou Lian had looked when rescuing him. Jingdao Villa disciples had stripped Tang Shiqi of his money and locked him in a prison cart. After exchanging one last silver note[18] hidden in the sole of his shoe for a chicken drumstick, he was penniless. As Tang Shiqi gnawed that drumstick in despair, Xiahou Lian had materialized from the darkness, flitting like a wraith among the four disciples escorting the prisoners. In the blink of an eye, all four had their throats slit. At the time, Tang Shiqi had been so terrified of Xiahou Lian that he hadn’t even noticed his drumstick fall at his feet. Only after Xiahou Lian left did Tang Shiqi realize that the man hadn’t come to save him at all; he’d only been there to kill the Liu Clan’s disciples.

Later, Tang Shiqi began following Xiahou Lian, helping him steal the Tang Clan’s mechanical manuals and craft Zhaoye. Xiahou Lian turned out to be a fantastic boss: He paid wages on time and gave out fat red envelopes during every festival. Often, Tang Shiqi even got to sleep for free at the Garden’s brothels.

“Hey, Boss?” Tang Shiqi said. “I’ll be really sad if you kick the bucket.”

Xiahou Lian turned to look at the round-faced man, who rarely scowled as he was doing now. He smiled. “Listen, Shiqi. There’s more to

life than just eating, shitting, and sleeping. There's always someone worth sacrificing yourself to protect. And even, when she's dead…to avenge."

"I once had someone like that too, Boss," Tang Shiqi said, lowering his head. "Remember Tang Lan, whose grave you dug up? He was my sixth uncle.[19] I didn't have parents, so he raised me from childhood. He taught me everything: mechanics, shooting a crossbow, all of it. I left the Tang Clan just to find him, but he was already dead. I don't even know who killed him. I don't even know where to aim my crossbow—it's just dead weight in my hands."

Xiahou Lian was momentarily stunned silent. After a pause, he said, "Ah…sorry. Uh… Well, don't worry. I reburied him, and I burn paper money for him every year."

"It's fine. Big-time sinners like us don't believe in gods or Buddhas anyway," Tang Shiqi replied, forcing a grin. "Boss, am I pathetic? Someone killed my sixth uncle, who treated me better than anyone, and yet here I am, whoring, drinking, and sleeping like nothing happened. I've always admired you, Boss. You're a man among men! You're decisive; you never hesitate. You cut down whatever stands in your way—men, gods, or Buddhas. I want to be as fearless as you, but then I think, 'Fuck, I struggled so hard just to make it this far!' If I threw my life away, how could I be doing right by myself? I've only got one wish: to die in a woman's bed. That's the best way for a man to go. Boss…do you think my uncle would hate me for that?"

"No," Xiahou Lian said. "He wouldn't want you to seek revenge."

"Right, Boss." Tang Shiqi looked up at Xiahou Lian. "So have you considered that the Garuda wouldn't want *you* to seek revenge either?"

Xiahou Lian laughed. After so much beating around the bush, it turned out that Tang Shiqi was still trying to persuade him. “Yeah, I know. I’ve always known my mother wouldn’t want me seeking vengeance.” Xiahou Lian cradled his wine, staring into the oppressive night. The moon had vanished behind the clouds, and beyond the courtyard a dense forest loomed, like a wall of spectral shadows. “But there are some things you have to do, even if you don’t truly want to. Every time I hold Hengbo, every time I lie down to sleep, the past hunts me down like a vengeful ghost.”

Tang Shiqi fell silent. The two young men gazed together into the pitch-black night; the sky above was crammed with stars that seemed on the verge of falling.

“After my mother died, I couldn’t sleep. I’d lie awake thinking about how to kill him.” Xiahou Lian took a slow sip of wine, then suddenly said, “The gap between us was just too large. After all, he was a grandmaster of the saber with three thousand disciples. I wasn’t afraid of killing him and becoming a target of revenge—I was terrified that I’d never even get close enough to try. I trained like a madman, threw my entire being into it. But I had no talent. Everyone in the Garden laughed at me and called me useless trash.”

“The hell you are! If you’re trash, what does that make *me*?!”

“It didn’t matter,” Xiahou Lian murmured. “No matter what they said, I knew I’d go after Liu Guicang someday. The worst thing wasn’t being called trash or a coward, it was knowing that even if time reversed, even if I could go back to the day my mother died in the streets…I still couldn’t step through the door and kill him.” Staring at Tang Shiqi, Xiahou Lian enunciated his next words. “So I accepted everything they called me, because I really am a useless piece of trash.”

Tang Shiqi stared blankly at Xiahou Lian. He saw the profound sorrow in Xiahou Lian's eyes—dense gloom like heavy iron—and suddenly understood that no one could stop him. This assassin could destroy both heaven and earth—could even destroy *himself*—all for the woman who'd died tragically in the streets.

Tang Shiqi wanted to say more. "Boss—"

"From now on, don't mess around like this, Shiqi," Xiahou Lian interrupted. "You're not bound to Qiye Garden, and you can't stay at Wanxiang Tower all the time. Get a proper job, marry a good wife. The best way for a man to go isn't dying in some random woman's bed, it's being laid to rest in a solid, ten-tael coffin beside his loving wife. Look at how happy the scholar is now that he's married!"

"And what about you, boss? How does it end for you?"

"For me?" Xiahou Lian stood, jumped into a large tree next to the roof, and slid down the trunk. Without looking back, he waved, striding down the shadowy walkway step by step. "My end…lies in the darkness."

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DARK CLOUDS HUNG LOW over the city like heavy ink strokes smeared on rice paper. Overhead, they pressed down until they seemed nearly within reach, their suffocating oppressiveness weighing down peoples' hearts.

Liu Guicang lifted the curtain of his carriage for a glance outside. Rain was imminent; the pedestrians hurried home to avoid being caught in

the downpour, and the streets quickly emptied but for a few vendors still packing up their stalls. The carriage wheels rumbling on the ground echoed like distant thunder, unnerving those not paying close attention to the source of the sound.

Liu Guicang ordered the coachman to speed up, then settled back in the carriage and closed his eye to rest.

The carriage continued to rumble along until it came to a sudden halt. “Villa Master!” Liu Guicang heard a disciple cry out.

Frowning, Liu Guicang opened the curtain. “What’s all the fuss?!” he shouted. But as the words left his mouth, he froze.

On the road just ahead, a black-clad girl sat astride a horse. The girl’s long, jet-black hair framed a pale face, featureless but for two dark, hollow eye sockets. Horse and rider were strung with bloodied human heads, their severed necks tangled in the unkempt hair that trailed behind her like the grim, chaotic final stroke of a deadly script. As the girl advanced, the heads bumped against each other with dull thuds like ancient drums summoning restless souls from the wastelands.

The disciples recoiled in terror. Some recognized the severed heads as those of Jingdao Villa disciples. The girl remained silent and expressionless, guiding her horse forward with eerie calm.

“M-Master!” one disciple stammered in panic. “Zhaoye! It’s Zhaoye!”

Liu Guicang raised a hand to silence him.

The horse halted, and a low, rasping voice echoed from further down the street like the whisper of a lonely ghost.

“Xiahou Lian of Qiye Garden is here to send Master Liu to paradise.”

Chapter 46:
People Like Weeds

As the words echoed around them, the girl dove forward like a swallow in flight. Her wide sleeves fluttered, and the cold gleam of her blade flashed before the disciples' eyes. She landed gracefully, and in a swift motion, her blade-arm sliced two disciples' throats. Blood sprayed out, blooming like vivid flowers in the darkness.

In the pitch-black night, a hoarse male voice counted down. "Eight."

The remaining eight disciples rushed forward as they drew their katana sabers in unison, the steel glinting like flowing water. Three blades struck Zhaoye's shoulder simultaneously with the crisp metallic clang of plucked lute strings. Frozen in shock, none of the three disciples had time to react before Zhaoye's blade-arm descended. Blood splattered as it sliced their arms clean off.

The voice continued its count. "Five."

The five uninjured disciples stumbled back, faces pale with terror.

"Master! I-it's not human!"

"A mechanical puppet." Liu Guicang took a step out of his carriage, balancing on its edge. His solitary eye narrowed slightly. "Steady, men! Target her joints and cut off her limbs!"

"Yes, sir!" they cried.

Three disciples charged Zhaoye head-on, while two flanked the puppet. Zhaoye crouched low like a drawn bow. When the three in front were just steps away, she shot forth like an unstoppable arrow aimed

straight for their faces—yet, as their blades swung, she suddenly dropped to her knees as if in reverence and slipped between two of them. Her swift movement let her dodge their strikes, and her blade moved through the gap she'd created.

Time seemed to stop. As Liu Guicang watched, the torsos of the two closest disciples slid from their legs and fell to the ground like discarded sacks.

The hoarse voice chuckled. "Three."

A shiver ran down Liu Guicang's spine as a chilling realization dawned on him. The enraged boy whose mother he'd slaughtered four years ago had returned as a bloodthirsty specter to stalk him from the shadows, waiting to exact revenge.

Another disciple's blade found its mark in Zhaoye's joint, only for her to trap the weapon instantly, locking it in place as her other blade-arm punched clean through its owner's stomach. Faster than the eye could see, she drove the blade in again and again, making mincemeat of the disciple's midsection and hammering him backward with each brutal thrust. As he stumbled back, retreating, Zhaoye advanced, then suddenly released the trapped saber. As a disciple ambushed her from behind, she swung around the first attacker's blade and body both, cleaving the second attacker clean in two.

"One."

Trembling like a freezing bird in icy wind, the final disciple clutched his saber and fixed his gaze on Zhaoye's delicate frame, his teeth clenched in dread. Zhaoye turned her head slightly as if glancing back at him, though

she had no eyes—just two hollow black sockets. Still, he felt her icy stare pierce him, frigid as winter frost.

Instead of advancing, Zhaoye moved toward Liu Guicang in the carriage. The disciple's sigh of relief was cut short as a black arrow shot from Zhaoye's sleeve and pierced his forehead. Blood streamed down his face as his sword slid from his grip, and he collapsed to the ground.

Liu Guicang applauded in admiration. "What an extraordinary puppet! I haven't seen one of such exquisite craftsmanship since the Tang Clan withdrew from the world eighteen years ago."

Zhaoye said nothing. Head bowed, she stood silently among the corpses as black clouds churned overhead, fierce winds whipping through her robes. A few droplets of blood stained her porcelain mask, like red plum blossoms on white paper.

"Son of the Garuda, you hid away for four long years. I thought you lacked the courage to challenge me. Now, you've crafted this deadly weapon just to face me."

Liu Guicang descended from the carriage, holding a narrow, sheathed blade curved like a crescent moon—a Japanese katana.

A mocking smile spread across his lips. "But do you know why the Tang Clan went into seclusion?" Placing his right hand on the katana's dark hilt, he raised his gaze, a wolf's ferocity flashing in his eyes. "Because mechanical witchcraft will never prevail against the true path of the blade!"

Zhaoye stomped her foot against the ground and charged toward Liu Guicang, her steel legs meeting the earth with resounding, drum-like echoes. Her flowing skirt revealed her straight, gleaming, blade-like legs.

Though she was silent, in that instant, Liu Guicang could’ve sworn that he heard the puppet woman wail.

Liu Guicang drew his katana, carving a crescent arc through the night, and their blades clashed; sparks of light sprayed like snowflakes. As they separated, the sound of steel splintering echoed; Liu Guicang had cut Zhaoye's blade-arm in half.

At the end of the main street near the east gates, Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing crouched behind a shop's paper-shaded windows surrounded by ten undercover Qiye Garden agents. As Zhaoye's blade-arm was severed, they gasped in shock.

"The ambush failed!" Shu Qing whispered. "Shige should retreat."

"You think that stubborn mule will retreat?" Tang Shiqi scoffed. "Never mind." Then he issued instructions to the Qiye Garden agents. "Listen for my signal: The moment things look bad, I'll count to three, and we'll dash out to rescue him."

The agents nodded.

The winds shifted ominously, and distant thunder rumbled like a carriage racing across the horizon. Liu Guicang gripped his blade and scanned his surroundings. Zhaoye was now nothing more than a motionless puppet. Inspecting her more closely, Liu Guicang saw that her head and shoulders were covered in fine, almost invisible threads that glinted with pale, ghostly light, as if covered in frost.

"Did you run away again, Xiahou Lian?" Liu Guicang roared. "Still hiding like a scared turtle?!"

From the archway above him, a shadow descended unseen, like a spider on a silken thread. Liu Guicang continued to scan the street, empty but for the corpses and the motionless puppet that littered the ground. Silence loomed like death itself.

Suddenly, a glint caught his eye. As a man who used his instincts to fight and kill, he reflexively swung his katana overhead. Sparks flew as blade met blade. A dark figure swooped down like a falcon, and Liu Guicang glimpsed a face almost terrifyingly reminiscent of the Garuda's. His heart skipped a beat. For a moment, he thought the demon-woman from years ago had risen again.

"Xiahou Lian," he sneered. "Not too scared to show your face anymore?"

"No—because I, Xiahou Lian, and not some Garden assassin, will be the one to kill you!" With that, Xiahou Lian struck, the clash of blades reverberating as both men staggered backward.

Lightning split the heavens as torrential rains cascaded to the earth. Water pooled quickly, soaking the battlefield. Wielding Hengbo with his right hand, Xiahou Lian used his left to draw a short blade from his waist, holding it in a reverse grip across his chest. He crouched slightly, rain streaking his icy features. Liu Guicang positioned himself for a strike, readying his quick-draw technique—a move capable of splitting Xiahou Lian in two.

Torrents of rain poured down as if the heavens themselves were collapsing, endless sheets of water cascading between them.

A split second later, Xiahou Lian and Liu Guicang simultaneously exhaled, launched themselves, and charged their foe. Blood and rainwater splashed beneath their feet as they closed the distance in a single breath. Liu Guicang drew his katana, its blade like lightning splitting the sky. Xiahou Lian dropped abruptly into a crouch, mirroring Zhaoye's earlier move, and used the dagger his left hand had in a reverse grip to slash at Liu Guicang's

calves. The latter leapt and twisted in midair in a move that seemed almost impossible, then reverse his momentum to slash at Xiahou Lian's back.

But there was no splatter of blood—steel sliced through fabric and met chainmail in a shower of sparks, and Xiahou Lian spun to meet Liu Guicang's blade in midair. In an instant, a dense and intricate web of blade strikes flashed between them, enveloping them entirely. Xiahou Lian's strikes fell like the torrential rains, each fiercer than the last. The moment Xiahou Lian's left hand fell, his right hand rose! Liu Guicang gasped for air, shocked to find he could barely keep up with the boy's furious assault.

Finally, Xiahou Lian spun upward, his robes fluttering like butterfly wings. He abandoned his dagger, channeling all his strength into Hengbo. The blade traced a cold arc like a crescent moon before delivering a mountainous, earth-shattering slash—the Moon Cleave of Qiye Garden's saber arts.

Liu Guicang blocked the strike head-on, but its impact reverberated through his blade, coursing from his palm to every nerve in his body like an icy serpent uncoiling inside him. His hand throbbed violently; when he looked down, he saw that the flesh of his palm had split open.

"Impossible!" he gasped, his voice hoarse, staring at Xiahou Lian in disbelief. "How could this be?! How could you defeat me?!"

Xiahou Lian hissed like a serpent, exhaling a slow, icy breath. His lips twisted into a vicious grin, eyes blazing with bloodthirsty determination.

"Because I've spent four years preparing!" he roared, swinging his blade again and forcing Liu Guicang to stagger back. "After studying countless saber techniques, I've finally deciphered your katana saber arts.

As for this killing strike—your granddaddy here”—Xiahou Lian now bellowed—“has practiced it *twenty-nine thousand, two hundred times!”*

Twenty-nine thousand, two hundred times—how could he lose?! He knew exactly how to counter every single known Japanese-style saber technique: The Skyward Slash? Dodge left. The Shin-Cleaving Strike? Leap over it. The Left-Upward Flick? Block horizontally. As for the Moon Cleave, he’d practiced it twenty times a day for four straight years!

For a moment, Liu Guicang’s vision blurred as his memory of the Garuda’s demonic eyes seemed to blend with Xiahou Lian’s piercing gaze. A chilling thought struck him—Xiahou Lian was the Garuda reborn; she’d crawled out of the grave for vengeance. In that instant, he saw the two unparalleled assassins smirk maliciously in unison and heard them whisper “Die, Liu Guicang!”

“Brother Shiqi, is Shige about to win?” Shu Qing asked excitedly, his gaze fixed on the street.

Tang Shiqi frowned. “It’s already been fifteen minutes, and your shige is still locked in combat. Any longer and the authorities will be upon us! This is bad.” He repeated his orders to the group. “Listen for my signal: I’ll count to three, and we’ll rush out and help him!”

The agents tightened their grips on their blades and gathered at the door.

Tang Shiqi kept his focus on the two figures in the street, watching them clash and separate repeatedly in the dark night. Their blades carved out a ring for a battle so impenetrably intense it seemed to ward off even the rain.

“One,” he whispered.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as lightning gathered within the storm clouds. Occasional flashes illuminated the night like striking dragons streaking through the skies.

“Two.”

No sooner had he spoken than a centipede-shaped bolt of lightning tore the sky open, seeming to create a massive breach. For an instant, the world turned stark white.

On the verge of saying “Three,” Tang Shiqi bit his tongue, swallowing the final number. He pushed Shu Qing aside and leaned closer to the papered window, eyes fixed on the street. When the lightning flashed again, Tang Shiqi saw something clearly—the shadows cast by the eaves revealed a row of heads clustered together like ivy hanging from a tree.

“What’s wrong?” asked a puzzled Shu Qing. “Why’d you stop counting?”

“This is a trap. We’re done for,” Tang Shiqi muttered, his voice shaking. He grabbed Shu Qing’s collar, the fear in his eyes leaping like candle flame. “It’s a fucking trap!”

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THE TORRENTIAL RAIN POURED DOWN, the night as heavy and oppressive as an unyielding iron cage. Shen Jue staggered forward unsteadily through the dense mist as if he’d somehow wandered off the path home and couldn’t find his way back. Dazed, he spotted a tall, shadowy figure ahead; it stood silently, blade in hand.

As Shen Jue trudged closer, the mist gradually parted until the figure came into view: A headless body stood before him. Startled, he hesitated, then took another step forward. Suddenly, his foot struck something on the ground. He glanced down and froze—Xiahou Lian’s severed head lay at his feet.

With a jolt, Shen Jue woke drenched in cold sweat.

He pulled aside the bed curtains to find the room steeped in darkness. Faint light seeped through the papered windows, casting weak outlines over the lacquered desk and polished nanmu chairs. A two-foot-tall cloisonné vase sat on the floor holding a withered bouquet of flowers; several of its shriveled, yellowing petals had scattered on the carpet. Outside, the wind howled as raindrops pelted the windows and rattled the roof tiles noisily. Shen Jue unlatched the window and pushed it open to see the garden below, now a bog of muddy flowerbeds.

Shen Jue summoned his servants, then lit a lantern and took a carriage to the private manor west of the capital. He didn’t call for Situ Jin or Shen Wenxing; he brought only the few agents working the night shift at the Shen household.

The manor’s occupant, Fang Cunzheng, was in a deep sleep. Upon learning that Shen Jue had arrived, he scrambled to get dressed, hastily tying his belt and slipping on his boots as he rushed to the main hall.

“What brings the depot chief here in the dead of night?” Fang Cunzheng asked with a nervous smile, offering Shen Jue a cup of tea. “If it’s something urgent, you could’ve sent a servant—I would’ve come to report to you personally.”

Shen Jue ignored the tea, his face cold. “How is the medicine coming along?”

“We tested the new formula on two subjects yesterday… They’re still unconscious,” Fang Cunzheng replied hesitantly.

Shen Jue’s lips curled into a chilling smile. “So, no progress at all?”

“Well, no…not exactly,” Fang Cunzheng stammered. Wringing his hands and forcing a smile onto his face, he continued, “If they wake up, then…”

Shen Jue strode into the backyard, where he peered through some gauze-covered windows at the test subjects. The heavy, medicinal reek of the room through the windows seeped through the screens. The test subjects lay on their beds, as stiff and motionless as wooden puppets. With a bitter laugh, Shen Jue turned to Fang Cunzheng. “I should’ve fed *you* the Seven Fifteen. It’s only May, so you still have time before then to perfect the antidote. *Your* life is on the line now, though, so maybe you’ll take this more seriously?”

Fang Cunzheng dropped to his knees, thumping his head against the floor furiously as tears streamed down his face. “Mercy, Depot Chief, please spare me! I’ve given this everything I have! The new formula will work—I just need more time. Please, have mercy, Depot Chief!”

Shen Jue didn’t respond, his cold gaze fixed on the raindrops hitting the steps. The sound of the rain, wind, and Fang Cunzheng’s desperate pleas seemed to come from far away, as though they belonged to another world. The image of that headless figure rematerialized in his mind, vivid and unrelenting.

Agitation flared within him like fire; if he had a blade, he might've cut Fang Cunzheng down then and there.

"Depot Chief!" A guard burst into the room, soaked from the rain, and handed Shen Jue a sealed report wrapped in oil paper. "Urgent news from Liuzhou!"

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BLOOD SOAKED LIU GUICANG'S HANDS as Xiahou Lian struck again. Finally, Liu Guicang collapsed in the rain, drained of the strength to support himself. Above his gore- and mud-caked beard, his lone eye remained locked on Xiahou Lian.

Rainwater streamed down Xiahou Lian's temples, tracing the sharp angles of his face. In the downpour, the black-clad assassin raised Hengbo with both hands, blood dripping steadily from its tip.

"Die, you old beast!" Xiahou Lian cried. "Ugh…!"

Sharp pain shot through his back like the bite of a venomous snake. Hengbo faltered mid-swing. Liu Guicang seized the moment, slashing at the blade and sending it spinning into a pile of goods by the roadside. Xiahou Lian felt a second sharp sting, this one in his leg. Looking down, he saw a black arrow protruding from his calf.

Without hesitation, he grabbed a katana saber from the ground and charged Liu Guicang again. This time, three arrows whistled out from the side—one pierced Xiahou Lian's right hand, and another passed clean

through his arm. Pain blazed through him like wildfire, blood oozing from his fingers.

Xiahou Lian collapsed. Rolling onto his back, he saw the rooftops around him lined with Liu Clan disciples, their cold, emotionless faces staring down at him.

A trap. This had been a trap!

At the far end of the street, Shu Qing grabbed Tang Shiqi and shook him violently. “Hurry! We must save my shige!”

“Shut up!” Tang Shiqi roared back. “Do you want all of us to die too?”

“Tang Shiqi!”

“You think I don’t want to save him? Look at them all, though—how many of them do you see? And how many people do we have? Let fate decide! Isn’t that the Garden rule, anyway? Not to save those who are fated to die? It’s up to the boss’s luck now!” Tang Shiqi gripped the windowsill so tightly his knuckles turned white. He shut his eyes and refused to watch any longer.

“You’re strong, Xiahou Lian.” Liu Guicang was standing over him, smiling. “It was raining just like this the night your mother died.”

Xiahou Lian forced himself to his feet, grabbing his blade and swinging it at Liu Guicang with a roar. Another arrow struck his leg, and he stumbled to the wet ground, the mud splattering his face.

“I’ve waited four years for this,” Liu Guicang continued. “Do you think you chose our battleground here at East Gate Street, Xiahou Lian? Well, you’re wrong. *I* chose it for you. I passed this exact spot on the first and fifteenth of every month. Each time, I stationed my disciples on the

rooftops to lie in wait for this day. You didn't disappoint me—you finally came."

Pain engulfed Xiahou Lian; he felt as though his very nerves were aflame. Clenching his teeth, he stood again and again, only to be beaten down each time.

Why? Why? Dragging his blade through the mud, Xiahou Lian tried to stumble toward Liu Guicang, his lungs heaving like bellows. *I have to kill him. I* must *kill him.*

But there was no way. Each time he rose, he was struck down. Finally, his head hit the ground and split open, beginning to bleed profusely. His body screamed in agony. He was like a fish flopping helplessly on a chopping board.

When he climbed to his feet again, another arrow whizzed past, grazing his cheek. Then Liu Guicang picked up a scabbard and drove it into Xiahou Lian's stomach. The younger man staggered back and fell, blood dripping through the fingers he pressed to his mouth.

"I can't kill you just yet—you still have your uses," Liu Guicang said, retrieving a stray arrow. "I'll take you to the chopping block and show the world that I captured the Garuda's son. My name will echo across the jianghu once more, and I can finally put that filthy scandal behind me. Your mother helped me rise to the top, Xiahou Lian, and now you'll secure my place as supreme ruler. I truly owe your family my deepest gratitude. Ha ha ha!"

Shut up. Shut up! Kill him. Kill him! The thoughts seared Xiahou Lian's mind like brands. He glared at Liu Guicang with wolflike ferocity.

“Hey, Cuckold Liu!” he spat venomously. “You think you can whitewash all your shame? Keep dreaming!”

Liu Guicang’s face darkened. Kneeling, he drove the arrow into Xiahou Lian’s left palm, pinning his hand to the ground. Xiahou Lian’s entire body convulsed. His face contorted with pain, but he didn’t cry out, although Liu Guicang hadn’t expected him to endure such excruciating pain in silence. Blood trickled from Xiahou Lian’s mouth—he had bitten his tongue.

Liu Guicang stood over him and sneered. “Do you think that killing me will prove you’re not a coward, Xiahou Lian? You’re nothing more than trash. You couldn’t kill me four years ago, and you can’t kill me now.” He turned to glance toward the carriage at Zhaoye. “A mechanical puppet? Pathetic. Hiding behind women is all you know how to do!”

“Shut up!” Xiahou Lian snarled, biting down hard as he pulled the arrow from his hand. He nearly fainted from the searing pain; he didn’t collapse, though. Instead, he rose again, dragging his blade upward. He gripped it tightly with both hands, the wounds on his palms ablaze with pain as if fire was consuming his nerves.

Step by step, he advanced. Liu Guicang leaned on his blade and watched. Xiahou Lian’s legs trembled like dry leaves in the wind, ready to give out at any moment. Yet he didn’t fall. His bloodshot eyes burned as he walked right up to Liu Guicang and let out a guttural howl, like a lone wolf crying out in fury and despair. In that moment, Liu Guicang saw a demon standing before him—a blood-soaked figure draped in flames of vengeance. Xiahou Lian’s blade traced a deadly arc, its tip gleaming faintly like a firefly in the night.

Then it stopped.

The firefly's light vanished, and the blade clattered to the ground, as Liu Guicang's scabbard slammed into the side of Xiahou Lian's head. The world spun as Xiahou Lian fell, cold rain drenching his face. Everything seemed to go silent but the shrill ringing in his ears. His vision blurred, but he saw Hengbo poking out of a pile of goods nearby, his bloodied face reflected in the shimmering blade.

In his haze, he thought he heard a familiar voice calling to him again.

"Xiao-Lian…"

Chapter 47:
A Fated Encounter

D*RIP... DRIP...*

The prison roof had a leak. Water ran off the eaves, trickled through the cracks, and dripped onto the floor, spreading in a damp patch. A small window covered with iron bars, each as thick as Xiahou Lian's wrist, sat high up on one wall, allowing just enough dim light through to prevent the cell from being in total darkness. All around Xiahou Lian were stone walls, and in one corner, a low, narrow door. The air was heavy and still but for the faint whisper of wind sneaking in through the window. The oppressive silence made Xiahou Lian feel like the prison's only prisoner. Occasionally, he could almost hear a faint clinking of chains in a distant cell, but the sound would quickly vanish like an illusion.

Night had fallen, wrapping him in a suffocating darkness. Only the faint beam of light through the window offered any reprieve. He curled up beneath the window, staring up at the dust motes swirling endlessly in the glow like tiny, aimless insects.

Drip… Drip…

He'd lost track of time. He might have been here five days, or maybe seven. When he first woke, he'd found that his wounds had been crudely bandaged—enough to keep him alive, though barely. His head throbbed, and when he reached up to touch it, he felt a swollen lump. He didn't need a mirror to know how awful he must look—he'd certainly been beaten black and blue, and he was probably utterly unrecognizable.

A thought hit him: His chance for revenge was gone. Liu Guicang was surely preparing for his public execution, and the only reason Xiahou Lian was still alive was to give the righteous martial artists traveling from all over time to reach Liuzhou. Four years—he'd spent four years perfecting his blade skills and mastering the art of mechanical puppeteering, but in the end, it wasn't enough. He'd failed to defeat Liu Guicang. Worse, he would now serve as nothing more than another stepping stone helping Liu Guicang secure his position as leader of the jianghu.

What a joke—a cruel, bitter joke.

Suddenly, the distant sound of firecrackers echoed through the air, followed by the boom of exploding fireworks. Xiahou Lian looked up and glimpsed of vibrant bursts of color illuminating the muted purple night sky. It was the Dragon Boat Festival—he'd almost forgotten.

Memories rushed back. One Dragon Boat Festival, Xiahou Pei had taken him to climb the nine-story pagoda at the Great Bao'en Temple in Suzhou. From the pagoda's topmost level, they could see the entire city spread out below, the rows of blue-tiled roofs and white walls stretching out like tiny chessboard squares over which people and carriages scurried like ants. The city's dazzling lights blended into a sea of stars until the entire city burned brightly against the night. Xiahou Lian had been ecstatic, clinging to the railing and shouting that he wanted to fly. Xiahou Pei had lifted him up effortlessly—her strength was terrifying—and used one hand to dangle five-year-old Xiahou Lian over the railing, as though he weighed nothing. Xiahou Lian had screamed in terror, bursting into tears on the spot, and Xiahou Pei had quickly pulled him back, exasperated.

"Why are you crying?" she'd asked. "Didn't you want to fly?"

That was just like Xiahou Pei. Xiahou Lian had never met anyone else like her. She was unreliable in every field beyond killing and arson. Yet she was also the kind of mother who let him sit on her shoulders to watch opera, who held him close in a boat as they listened to the bells of Hanshan Temple, and who took him to temple fairs, staying until the very last vendor packed up.

Someone had once told him that the world was full of doors; behind each door was a room, and in each room lived a family. Back then, he'd been too young to understand. He saw other children with two parents—some with multiple mothers, even—while he had only one, and she was unreliable. He had thrown tantrums at Xiahou Pei over it, running around the Garden village and demanding to know who his father was and where he lived. No one had answered him—perhaps no one dared—and eventually, he gave up. Now he understood: That one room, just his and his mother's, had been enough. It was home.

But now it was too late. That home no longer existed.

A sharp ache rose in his chest, his throat tightening as tears spilled from his eyes. He covered his face, but the tears flowed freely through his fingers. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't cry again. He was twenty-one; he shouldn't cry anymore. Yet whenever he thought of the past, he couldn't hold back.

Time crept by. The sound of the fireworks outside faded out until the world was silent once again. Dawn crept in slowly, and Xiahou Lian heard the distant crow of a rooster. The light from the small window brightened, spilling through the bars in pale beams that divided the room into grids of light and shadow.

Then, the sound of a key turning broke the silence; he heard an unmistakable click as it twisted in the lock.

He knew what came next. They would lead him to the chopping block, where Liu Guicang would sever his head before the entire jianghu. His blood would stain the platform, mingling with the blood of countless others that had already soaked into the ground. He would die, and his soul would descend into the underworld. Would his mother be there to greet him?

In that moment, Xiahou Lian finally understood why people believed in the underworld. It wasn't the fear of death that made them hope for reincarnation, it was the desperate yearning to one day reunite with those they loved most.

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THE GUEST HALL in the Garden's southwest relay station was thick with despair and crowded with a motley assortment of people: salt smugglers headed southwest, fugitives from the authorities, and prostitutes who'd failed to make a living in the Central Plains and came south to start anew. Flies darted aimlessly in the air, occasionally alighting on greasy tabletops to prod plates of beef with their filthy legs before people quickly swatted them away. The hands that waved them off were rough, bearing the scars and callouses of fighters accustomed to wielding knives.

A round-faced man suddenly leapt onto the large table in the center of the room and spoke in a voice hoarse from too much shouting. "Ladies

and gentlemen, please quiet down! My name is Tang Shiqi. Hear me out, please!”

No one paid him much attention as they continued to eat, drink, and chat.

Tang Shiqi stomped his foot. “Whoever listens to me gets a tael of silver!”

The room fell silent almost instantly as all eyes turned to Tang Shiqi. He waved his hand dramatically, whereupon Shu Qing and some servants hauled in a large chest and began to distribute silver to each table. Tang Shiqi winced as he watched the money flow away, but he was out of options. *It’s Xiahou Lian’s silver anyway. Why should I be sad over it?!*

“Have you all heard about the execution taking place at the chopping block in two days?” Tang Shiqi bellowed, scanning the faces in the room.

“Of course!” someone replied. “It’s all over the jianghu. That old cuckold Liu Guicang has posted notices everywhere. He captured the Garuda’s son, the Wuminggui, and he’ll behead him two days from now on the outskirts of Liuzhou!”

“Then how can you sit here so calmly, drinking and feasting?” Tang Shiqi demanded, throwing up his arms in feigned indignation.

“What does his execution have to do with us?” someone scoffed. “If the Garden won’t save him, why should we? Poor Garden assassins. I hear their rules are strict—no saving those destined to die, no rescuing captives, no helping traitors. The Wuminggui has no choice but to accept his fate.”

Tang Shiqi stomped his foot. “Are you all fools?!” he asked, voice full of grief and indignation, spittle flying. “Do you know how many champions of the underworld have been killed at the chopping block? Just

last month, they beheaded Yang the Heart-Taker, a hero of our criminal world who took a hundred and twenty-eight hearts over the course of his career and struck fear into the righteous sects! A month before that, they executed Liu the Left-Handed Blade—he lost his right hand, but trained his left and still thrived, once single-handedly fighting seventy-two righteous foes! What a hero! And let's not forget Gao-dalang, the Wind-Dwelling Blade, and the Lone Mountain Wanderer—all first-class champions, all fallen to the chopping block!"

The crowd grew silent.

Tang Shiqi took a sip of water. "Don't you see what Liu Guicang is planning?" he continued. "He's killing off our best one by one, uniting the righteous sects to dominate the jianghu. Once he succeeds, he'll wipe the underworld out completely! Do you really think you'll be able to sit here, eating, drinking, and enjoying yourselves after that happens?"

The crowd exchanged uneasy glances, but no one spoke. One onlooker muttered, "But the Wuminggui has killed plenty of people too—" Before they could finish, someone clamped a hand over their mouth and dragged them away.

Tang Shiqi pounded his chest, his voice full of furious grief. "Ever since they built that chopping block, they've treated us underworld folk worse than rats! How many atrocities has that old turtle Liu Guicang committed against us? How can you just turn a blind eye?" He pointed to a broad-faced man, who awkwardly scrambled to stand. "Old Li, you tell us —what has Liu Guicang done to you?"

The man stammered, looking helplessly at Tang Shiqi. "Liu…Liu Guicang, he…"

Glaring at him, Tang Shiqi leaned in to whisper. “You took three taels of silver from me. If you don’t say something, I’ll make you pay them back!”

The man shuddered and blurted out, “Liu Guicang…violated my mother!”

The room fell silent, shocked. Even Tang Shiqi was caught off guard and froze for a moment. Whispers spread quickly through the room. From the back, someone asked, “Excuse me, but how old is your mother…?”

The man’s lips trembled, and he stammered for a long while without answering.

Suddenly, there was a furious roar as Shu Qing smashed a teapot on the ground, shards scattering everywhere. Eyes bloodshot, he screamed, “Liu Guicang—that bastard! He doesn’t even spare old women!”

Tang Shiqi returned to his senses and likewise shouted, “That beast!”

“Yeah!” someone else cried. “That scumbag captured my little brother just a few days ago! He was only sixteen. Jingdao Villa’s men killed him on the spot just for stealing a hairpin!”

“And my brother!” another voice chimed in. “Someone in the neighboring village killed my father. My brother went to avenge him, but Liu’s men captured him. They locked him in a private prison, and we haven’t seen him since! We’re salt smugglers, so we can’t even go to the authorities for help. What’re we supposed to do?”

Rage and indignation spread; everyone began to roar. Shouts of “Damn Liu Guicang!” and “That bastard!” filled the air; the curses swelling until the crowd was howling like a tide, their eyes red with fury.

Seizing the moment, Tang Shiqi drew his blade and raised it high overhead. “In that case, we should take advantage of the execution in two days! Let’s kill Liu Guicang and rescue the Wuminggui! Let’s restore the glory of the underworld and reclaim our honor!”

“Kill Liu Guicang!”

“Rescue the Wuminggui!”

“Restore our glory as criminals!”

“Reclaim our honor!”

The occupants of the Garden’s relay station erupted with fervor. Smugglers, murderers, thieves, con artists, and even prostitutes stood up, drawing their blades and raising them high. The sunlight glinted off a sea of blades, and miscreants’ unified shouts shook the walls. Tang Shiqi glanced at Shu Qing, who stood among the crowd, eyes shining brightly as he nodded back at him.

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TWO DAYS PASSED in a flash. On the day of the execution, Liu Guicang’s men loaded Xiahou Lian onto a wagon under orders from Liu Guicang to parade the prisoner through the streets before taking him to the chopping block on the city outskirts. Crowds swarmed both sides of the street; three generations of families—parents, grandparents, and children alike—poured out and gathered to witness Xiahou Lian’s disgraceful procession. The street was packed with a sea of people; even the second-

floor shop windows were open, where heads peered out, one atop another as they craned to watch the spectacle.

As the cart began to move, Xiahou Lian leaned against the rail, peering through his disheveled hair. He caught glimpses of faces in the crowd, some curious, others excited, a few afraid—but most filled with contempt, disdain, and hatred.

From the moment he'd stepped into the jianghu, his hands had been stained with blood; now his infamy had spread far and wide, making him someone who everybody wanted dead. He didn't fear death, but bitterness gnawed at him—he was dying humiliated, unrevenged, and under Liu Guicang's blade. As the wagon creaked along, an egg struck his forehead, the putrid yolk sliding down the bridge of his nose. More rotten eggs and spoiled vegetables immediately rained down on him. Stones flew too, one slicing his brow. Blood mixed with the rancid juices seeping down into his collar. Yet Xiahou Lian neither flinched nor moved, as though he were a lifeless statue.

The prison cart made its way through the waves of people straight to Liuzhou's outskirts, where the platform had already been prepared, along with a public viewing area. Hundreds of disciples from various sects surrounded the execution site. This event was being hailed as a grand occasion in the jianghu, which had prompted Liu Guicang to move the chopping block outside the city to accommodate the large crowd.

Liu Guicang stood on the lofty platform, flanked by five seated sect leaders, all casting their judgmental gazes down on Xiahou Lian. The cart stopped, and two disciples shoved Xiahou Lian up onto the chopping block. Xiahou Lian looked up at the tall dais to fix his icy gaze on Liu Guicang.

Liu Guicang frowned slightly, then sneered in disdain.

“He certainly has the eyes you’d expect on an assassin. They’re just like a wolf’s: untamed, vicious, and bloodthirsty,” the leader of the East Sea Nuchao Sect remarked with admiration.

Liu Guicang scoffed. “Utterly revolting—just like his mother.”

The chopping block buzzed with excitement, disciples grinning and laughing. Xiahou Lian heard some jeerers call him a scoundrel; others shouted that they’d use his severed head as a ball to kick around.

Xiahou Lian showed no reaction. Such taunts and insults had become meaningless. He no longer cared whether the entire world abandoned him. There was no hope for survival: Chiyan was far away in the Oirats, Master Qiu at the southern border, and Uncle Duan in the capital, all too distant to help. The Garden would never arrange the rescue of a doomed assassin, and Shu Qing and Tang Shiqi couldn’t wrestle him from the jaws of death.

He knew he was going to die.

The scorching sunlight beat down on him, so bright his eyes ached. He lowered his gaze to his shadow, watching his hair blow in the wind, as unruly as a beggar’s. A bitter, mocking laugh escaped his lips—He truly was useless, incompetent, a coward—the Garden assassins had been right all along. Xiahou Lian was the shame of Xiahou Pei.

It was now quarter to one. The disciples kicked Xiahou Lian to his knees. As the executioner raised the Japanese-style saber high over his head, sunlight hit the blade’s edge in a dazzling golden arc. The crowd fell silent, breath held and eyes fixed as they waited for Xiahou Lian’s head to fall.

Xiahou Lian closed his eyes.

Suddenly, a sharp tearing sound broke the silence like silk being ripped apart. The katana saber didn't strike his neck. Instead, gasps rippled through the crowd, followed by a tidal wave of chaos. Xiahou Lian opened his eyes to see the executioner stumble before him, blood trickling down from a black arrow embedded in his forehead. The katana saber clattered to the ground, and the executioner fell to his knees at Xiahou Lian's feet.

"Assassins!" a disciple shouted frantically.

Xiahou Lian jolted, startled.

From the dusty yellow hills, a wave of black surged forth and swept down like a flood. At its forefront was Tang Shiqi, carrying Hengbo and shouting, "Boss!" Shu Qing followed close behind along with countless others roaring in unison. The black tide crashed over the righteous disciples like a raging storm.

Drawing their blades, the sect disciples turned, sunlight flashing on their steel like bolts of lightning. More disciples swarmed in, cutting off the path between Tang Shiqi and Xiahou Lian.

The leader of the Junzi Blade Sect rose in alarm. "Villa Master Liu!"

Liu Guicang raised his hand and calmly shook his head. "It's just a bunch of rabble. Watch how easily Jingdao Villa's disciples deal with them."

Xiahou Lian's pupils contracted as several disciples rushed his way to pin him down. He quickly wound his shackles together and smashed them into one disciple's face, splattering blood and shattering bone. As the wind from an incoming blade rushed toward his back, Xiahou Lian ducked and twisted, wrapping his chains around another disciple's throat and snapping his neck. He grabbed a fallen katana saber from the ground and rose, his

sharp eyes burning with wolfish ferocity from behind locks of disheveled hair.

The crowd shrank back in fear. When a captured monster regained a blade, he became no less than a demon from hell.

Tang Shiqi plunged into the fray, twin blades slicing wildly like the claws of a ferocious beast tearing through its prey. Shu Qing followed close behind, and they worked as a team, one clearing a path while the other protected their rear. Underworld allies surrounded them, the sound of battle overwhelming the earth and sky. Blood splattered across Tang Shiqi's blades as he carved through the crowd with relentless force, each swing sending chunks of flesh flying. Together, Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing formed a swirling vortex, cutting down anyone who came too close.

Spilled blood cloaked the battlefield in crimson. It soaked Tang Shiqi's hands, sticky, as wave after wave of enemies surged his way. Ignoring the risk, he charged ahead, blade cleaving flesh and bone with every attack. A lifelong coward who'd relied on women for a living, Tang Shiqi had never dared to avenge his sixth uncle. Yet here he was, taking on the biggest fight of his life to save Xiahou Lian, a foolish man willing to destroy himself for the sake of vengeance.

Xiahou Lian moved swiftly, his entire face streaked with blood—whether his own or his enemies', he couldn't say. Wounds accumulated all over his body, but he was evidently impervious to the pain, cutting and slashing relentlessly.

"Boss, you're incredible! Don't you dare die before this useless idiot!" Tang Shiqi roared, pulling Hengbo from his back and hurling it toward Xiahou Lian.

Dropping the katana saber, Xiahou Lian leapt into the air, caught Hengbo midflight, and severed a man's arm in a single strike before meeting Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing. The three stood back-to-back against the surging crowd. Xiahou Lian tossed a key stolen off a disciple to Tang Shiqi, who quickly unlocked his shackles.

"Not bad," Xiahou Lian smirked, his expression sharp and fierce. "How'd you get all these people as backup?"

"By spending your money!" Tang Shiqi replied, laughing heartily. "The rest will be my reward!"

More enemies rushed toward them, but the three continued to slash in tandem. Severed limbs flew through the air, and blood rained down in a storm. Xiahou Lian pulsed with adrenaline, his chest heaving as he gulped down air. He heard flesh tear and bone snap, righteous sect disciples cry out in anguish, and the wind howl in his ears. Swallow's Swoop led into Moon Cleave followed by a single-blade spin and, finally, a horizontal slash. No one could withstand Xiahou Lian's assault as he carved a blood-soaked path that split the crowd, leaving a gory trail like a raw wound.

Up on the platform, the sect leaders watched with feigned detachment. The leader of the East Sea's Nuchao Sect stroked his beard and sighed. "His swordplay is truly frightening. Even I might not withstand such ferocity."

The head of the Junzi Blade Sect leader replied in a low voice, "That's because of Hengbo. It drank so much blood in the Garuda's hands that it's learned to slake its bloodthirst on its own."

Liu Guicang sneered. "Still, however strong he is, one man alone can't defeat an entire army."

Xiahou Lian and his companions continued their desperate fight.

The enemy forces' numbers grew, while those of their underworld allies dwindled. Old Li, who'd claimed at the relay station that Liu Guicang violated his mother, let out one last scream before the crowd swallowed him. Countless feet trampled his body, crushing his head to pulp. Tang Shiqi gritted his teeth and kept fighting, though his strength was rapidly fading. He could barely keep up with Xiahou Lian. Shu Qing gasped for breath, only keeping close because Tang Shiqi dragged him along.

"Boss!" Tang Shiqi shouted. "We're out of people!"

Xiahou Lian gripped Hengbo tightly as righteous sect disciples surrounded the trio and their remaining underworld brothers. There was no way out.

"Who'd have thought that I'd end up dying with you, Boss?" Tang Shiqi tossed aside his left-hand blade and gripped his remaining weapon with both hands. He smiled wearily, his face—once cheerful and round—now smeared with blood and almost unrecognizable. "I always thought I'd die in bed with a beautiful woman!"

"Shiqi, don't give up!" Xiahou Lian bellowed. "You came to save me, and I swear I'll get you out alive! And you, Shu Qing—stand up!"

Shu Qing's blade was dragging behind him. "Shige! If you make it out, take care of Liushao-er for me. Everything's entrusted to you—our master!"

"Shut up! Take care of your own people!" Xiahou Lian roared, his voice like a cornered wolf, swinging Hengbo and gouging into the wave of disciples bearing down on them.

He was drenched in blood, his eyes glowing red, feral and demonic. The disciples began to raise their blades but hesitated to approach.

“Charge! Kill him!” shouted Liu Guicang from atop the high platform.

The disciples exchanged nervous glances, then steeled themselves and brandished their weapons once more. Before they could strike, thunderous hoofbeats echoed from afar, deep and rhythmic as war drums pounding with all their might. The five sect leaders stood up, staring in shock toward the distant woods.

A long column of riders charged from the woods, clad entirely in black but for the stark white masks covering their faces. Each wielded a long blade, and together they surged forward like a black tide. Their horses wore blinders, with iron-shod hooves that kicked up clouds of dust. In stark contrast to Tang Shiqi’s ragtag crew, these were elite warriors, disciplined and coordinated. They pierced the battlefield like a black arrow, their blades dripping with blood; men fell beneath their horses and were crushed into the earth.

“So many Garden assassins… So many!” the Tianyi Blade Sect leader muttered, his voice trembling.

“There must be three hundred of them!” whispered the Junzi Blade Sect leader in horror.

“No…*five* hundred!” the Tianyi Blade Sect leader corrected.

It was said that each Garden assassin was as deadly as an entire army. Five hundred such assassins was a force beyond comprehension. They rapidly overwhelmed the righteous sect disciples, scattering them like sand in a storm. Bodies fell as the assassins’ blades slashed throats with

precision, the wounds spraying blood like fountains. The five hundred Garden assassins swept the battlefield like demons risen from hell, reaping lives without mercy.

At the head of the formation rode a man cloaked in dust. Cutting through the chaos as if no one would dare to stop him, he reined his horse in directly in front of Xiahou Lian.

Xiahou Lian stared at him, stunned. “You’re…”

The man extended a pale hand to Xiahou Lian. His fingers were slender and immaculate, the nails neatly trimmed. “Xiahou Lian, you seek revenge, don’t you? Let me take you to claim it.”

Backlit by the sun, the man’s figure astride his horse was tall and lean. Xiahou Lian couldn’t see his face, just the silhouette of his sharp, elegant frame, yet he inexplicably felt an unshakable trust. It was as if he’d known this man in a past life—as if their meeting was a reunion written in the stars. Xiahou Lian took the man’s outstretched hand. It was cool to the touch, yet unaccountably warm.

The man pulled Xiahou Lian onto the horse behind him. Xiahou Lian wrapped his left arm around the rider’s waist.

“Hold on tight,” the man said quietly. “It’s time to take revenge!”

Chapter 48:
Bonds of Glue and Lacquer

A MAN IN BLACK GAZED DOWN from the southern slope to the fighting below. The black-clad assassins surged like a tidal wave, swiftly engulfing the battlefield. They mercilessly crushed the righteous disciples, who fell like rows of razed wheat. With a high yell, the man signaled the snipers behind him to lower their crossbows, which had been aimed at Liu Guicang on his high platform.

“To think that Xiao-Lian kid actually got reinforcements,” the man chuckled softly. His hood obscured his face, revealing only a faint moustache that quivered with his smile. “It seems like us old relics should just retire—this battlefield belongs to the young now.”

Tang Shiqi stared in shock at the Garden assassins descending from the heavens. “Damn—having a father really pays off!” he muttered to Shu Qing. “Looks like Qiye Garden called every undercover agent from the entire southwest region to Liuzhou!”

“No…! No, they’re not…” Shu Qing stared as one of the assassins bent, raised his blade, and cut down two righteous disciples in a swift motion. “They’re not from the Garden! They’re not using Garden saber arts!”

Tang Shiqi was stunned. “If they’re not from the Garden, then…who are they?”

The black tide surged forward, overwhelming the righteous disciples like the flood from a collapsed dam. The assassin carrying Xiahou Lian

galloped straight toward the high platform.

The sect leaders exchanged frightened glances as a chill ran through their hearts. They were trapped on the high platform with a bloody battlefield before them and a steep mountain behind. There was no retreat—they could only fight!

When Xiahou Lian and the unknown assassin neared the high platform, the assassin reined in his horse and ordered, “Go!”

Dismounting, he drew a slender saber from the horse’s side, its silver blade gleaming like liquid mercury under the sunlight. The saber was exquisitely crafted, but its hilt and scabbard had been deliberately sanded smooth, making its origins impossible to know. Xiahou Lian immediately understood that this man was hiding his identity.

There was no time to think. Xiahou Lian likewise dismounted, holding Hengbo horizontally at his elbow and then yanking it out in a fierce motion. The bloodstains were wiped clean, revealing Hengbo’s gleaming blade. Swords raised, the two men stood side by side and strode forward. They were like demons crawling from the depths of hell; their bloodthirstiness was palpable.

Two assassins dismounted and knelt before the high platform to serve as stepping stones. Xiahou Lian and the assassin broke into a run, synchronizing their breathing perfectly. With a powerful leap, they vaulted together onto the high platform!

“Liu Guicang is mine!” Xiahou Lian shouted. “Don’t interfere!”

“Understood!” The assassin blocked the Tianyi Blade Sect leader, then kicked him away fiercely.

Xiahou Lian swung Hengbo, the blade hissing through the air like a serpent's bared fangs to strike Liu Guicang's sword. Xiahou Lian and Liu Guicang faced one another, blade to blade, breath mingling.

"Today you die, Liu Guicang!"

"Xiahou Lian, you useless trash, you can't kill me!" Liu Guicang roared like an enraged lion, his graying beard wild and disheveled. Their blades clashed repeatedly, sparks flying, until their force bloodied both their hands.

As Xiahou Lian and Liu Guicang fought fiercely, the rest of the sect leaders joined forces to attack the other assassin simultaneously, almost as if telepathically linked. They quickly realized that the unknown assassin's blade techniques were uncanny, more formidable than even Xiahou Lian's; the strikes were unpredictable, impossible to follow or anticipate. When the Junzi Blade Sect leader raised his sword to deflect his blow, the assassin's blade snaked around his guard like a venomous serpent and bit into his arm.

It was terrifying—absolutely terrifying—and the sect leaders felt a chill in their hearts. One accidentally met the assassin's gaze as their blades clashed, and he instantly felt as if a chunk of ice were lodged in his chest. The assassin's eyes were like a mountain wraith's, frigid with ancient sorrow. If Xiahou Lian was a blazing flame, this man was a cold, solitary block of ice.

But there were five sect leaders. They exchanged glances and quickly shifted positions, assuming a blade formation to launch a relentless barrage of attacks. Each direction was covered, and even if he'd had three heads and six arms, the assassin couldn't possibly defend every potentially fatal

vulnerability! The assassin's movements quickly slowed. He staggered as searing pain shot through his back, barely dodging a deadly vertical slash.

Seeing this, Xiahou Lian immediately broke off his fight with Liu Guicang and rushed to the assassin's aid. The two stood back-to-back.

"Are you all right?!" asked Xiahou Lian.

"It's just a scratch," the assassin replied through gritted teeth.

"Hey—you still haven't told me who you are."

"Me?" The assassin looked deeply into Xiahou Lian's eyes, then chuckled softly, severing another sect leader's arm. "Xiahou Lian, I am your savior!"

Xiahou Lian was stunned. A name danced on the tip of his tongue. But how could it be *him*? They'd been apart for seven years, and seven years was enough time to change everything. Plus, even if he'd wanted to save Xiahou Lian, how could he have traveled thousands of miles from the capital to Liuzhou in just a few days?

Swinging his blade, Xiahou Lian recalled that sorrowful, solitary youth—and somehow, the assassin's tall figure began to overlap with that youth's silhouette. Both were solitary, resilient; both charged forward without hesitation. Though Xiahou Lian and the assassin had never before fought side by side, they coordinated as seamlessly as if they'd known each other for years.

When Xiahou Lian blocked a thunderous strike from the Nuchao Sect leader, the assassin's blade immediately pierced the leader's abdomen from behind. When the assassin warded off the Junzi Blade Sect leader's swirling slash, Xiahou Lian stepped forward and decapitated his attacker. Xiahou

Lian pursed his lips as that strange feeling once more flowed quietly through his heart.

But how could it be him? There was no way Shen Jue could've traveled there in just a few days. Xiahou Lian shook his head vigorously to push the thought aside and threw himself back into the fight.

Before long, the sect leaders fell one by one, leaving only Liu Guicang. He leaned on his sword. His expression was grave, his disbelief evident as he stared at the sea of blood around him. With the other sect leaders dead, Liu Guicang's righteous path was all but finished.

The assassin sheathed his sword and stood quietly to one side. Xiahou Lian nodded to him, then strode toward Liu Guicang, blade out. Xiahou Lian didn't notice the assassin's trembling hand—his ally was at his limit, body racked with exhaustion. He no longer had the strength to help Xiahou Lian kill Liu Guicang, even if he wanted to.

Xiahou Lian wiped Hengbo with his sleeve, the blade refracting sunlight in an unsteady flicker on the ground. "Hey, Liu Guicang—any last words before you die?"

"Do you want to hear me beg for mercy, Xiahou Lian?" Liu Guicang sneered, eyes glinting with a tiger's ferocity. "Dream on. I am the heir to the art of the katana saber! I'll never grovel to scum like you!"

Liu Guicang turned to survey the killing field below the platform. Most of the righteous sect disciples lay dead or wounded as black-clad assassins rode their horses through the carnage. Bleak sorrow welled up in his eyes.

"You keep talking about taking *your* revenge on *me*, Xiahou Lian. But did you know your mother killed my shifu, the third-generation

successor to the katana saber? I killed her to avenge my shifu's death! The day she killed him, the sun was just as bright as it is today. My shifu was in his twilight years, and my shiniang knelt on the ground and begged the Garuda to spare him. But your mother showed no mercy. She took my shifu's head with a single stroke. You assassins are drowning in blood debts—you deserve to be torn limb from limb and left to rot without proper burial!"

Xiahou Lian was silent for a moment then suddenly laughed. "So I'm drowning in blood debts? What about you? Do you think you're clean? How much blood have you spilled, you bastard? Don't pretend you don't know. Those who kill shall be killed in return—that's just how karma works. Your shifu got what was coming to him, and so did my mother. Now, it's your turn, and someday, it'll be mine. The world never gave us a choice; the moment your shifu first bloodied his saber, you were doomed to end like this."

Liu Guicang was briefly stunned; then he laughed as well. "All I ever wanted was for our katana saber arts to become eternal in the jianghu, a legacy passed down through countless generations. I see now that such a dream is impossible. So be it—perhaps a cursed art is better left unshared. Come, Xiahou Lian. This battle is ours alone!"

Hengbo flashed violently in Xiahou Lian's grip, its blade catching the sunlight and emitting a blinding glare. The wind howled, surging with killing intent as Xiahou Lian charged. The platform's wooden planks shuddered beneath his pounding steps, the sleeves of his white prisoner's robes flapping like moth wings. Ahead of him, Hengbo struck toward the enemy.

Liu Guicang stood firm, his blade raised to meet the shimmering, moon-in-water glow of Hengbo's edge. His face had gone as still as carved ice, but the thunder of his breath raged in his chest. Then, suddenly, he let go of his saber. It clattered to the ground, and he closed his eyes, welcoming Hengbo's razor-sharp blade. The point pierced his chest, and hot, bright blood surged from the wound. Liu Guicang's body crumpled to the ground like a collapsing mountain.

Xiahou Lian was stunned. He kept his grip on Hengbo as Liu Guicang's chest heaved violently. The man reached up and grabbed Xiahou Lian's shoulder in a death grip.

"Xiahou Lian, do you think killing me means you've avenged your mother?" Liu Guicang asked, chuckling weakly. "You're wrong…you're wrong! Your enemy is in the Garden!"

His words hit Xiahou Lian like lightning, making him freeze. "What do you mean?"

"Retribution upon *you*…is coming!" With that, Liu Guicang tilted back his head, spat out one last mouthful of blood, and fell silent, lifeless. His hand slipped from Xiahou Lian's shoulder.

"What do you mean?" Xiahou Lian demanded. He shook Liu Guicang's rapidly cooling corpse, but the man's lifeless eyes seemed to mock his ignorance. "Explain! Tell me!"

His enemy was in the Garden? What did Liu Guicang mean? Xiahou Lian's head throbbed.

The assassin spoke up from behind him. "Are you a fool? There's a mole in the Garden, and it's probably no small fry."

Xiahou Lian turned. The assassin sat on a chair resting, saber across his knees. “I know! I just—”

“Can’t believe it?” The assassin chuckled. “Why not? The world runs on personal gain. Everyone’s chasing a profit. For the right price, people will betray their own friends or family, to say nothing of their colleagues.”

Xiahou Lian eyed him suspiciously. “Then what do *you* gain by saving me? Who exactly are you?”

The assassin fell silent. Below the platform, another assassin shouted toward them, “Sir! The soldiers have arrived!”

“Boss! There’re soldiers here!” Tang Shiqi shouted as well. “Are you done? We need to get out of here!”

The assassin jumped down from the platform, mounted his horse, and gestured. Several assassins dismounted their own horses and climbed onto their comrades’ mounts.

“Those horses are for you,” the assassin said, gripping his reins to ride away. “Cherish your life, Xiahou Lian.”

“Hey! You still haven’t told me who you are!” Xiahou Lian shouted at him.

The assassin didn’t respond. He led his men away, leaving nothing in eyeshot but his retreating back.

“Shaoye!” Xiahou Lian shouted. “Damn it all, Shaoye, is it really you?!”

The assassin still didn’t look back, and his group disappeared into the dense forest. In an instant, only corpses were left on the battlefield, still and silent beneath the whistling wind.

Xiahou Lian jumped down from the high platform and grabbed Shu Qing by the collar. “How long was I locked up for?”

“Seventeen days.” Shu Qing struggled free. “Shige, who were those people? Your friends? Why were they disguised as Garden assassins?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Tang Shiqi asked with a sly grin. “Boss just called that man ‘Shaoye.’ Be honest with us, Boss—did you cozy up to some influential young master? Not bad, not bad! You’re even better at this than I am!”

Xiahou Lian felt driven to distraction. He’d been locked up for seventeen days, and it was over two thousand miles—including two mountain crossings—from the capital to Liuzhou. Seventeen days wasn’t enough. Moreover, Xiahou Lian had never before seen or even heard of the man’s ghostly blade techniques. If that man had really been the young master, he would’ve been using the Garden saber arts that Xiahou Lian had taught him. So who the hell was he?! *Damn that bastard Liu Guicang, speaking in riddles without explaining anything! Damn him!* Ignoring Tang Shiqi and Shu Qing’s chatter, Xiahou Lian mounted his horse and galloped off down a random path.

Behind him, in the distant forest, the mysterious assassin sat on his horse and watched Xiahou Lian retreat. At last, he removed his plain porcelain mask, revealing Shen Jue’s own pale face, the dark circles under his eyes betraying his exhaustion. He coughed softly.

The Eastern Depot riders shed their black robes, revealing gold-embroidered garments beneath.

“Depot Chief, you’re injured,” one of the riders reminded him.

As soon as he spoke, Shen Jue swayed, then suddenly fell from his horse. The riders panicked, shouting “Depot Chief!” and hurriedly dismounting to help the unconscious Shen Jue.

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SITU JIN HURRIED to the courtyard of the Eastern Depot’s Liuzhou branch. Yu Xianru, the local supervisor, had been waiting anxiously in the walkway, pacing back and forth. When he saw Situ Jin, his face lit up as if he’d spotted his own mother.

“Ah, Commander Situ—you’ve finally arrived!” said Yu Xianru, following closely behind Situ Jin. “Erm, really, about our depot chief. He didn’t even say hello, just appeared in a blink! Didn’t even have time for a sip of tea—he just summoned five hundred of his agents and rushed to the outskirts to finish off Liu Guicang. Most frightening! Tell me—what was that all about?!”

Situ Jin gave him a frosty look.

Seeing his expression, Yu Xianru’s heart somersaulted, and he stammered, “Commander Situ…the depot chief traveled day and night without rest to reach Liuzhou. They say he barely slept two hours each day on the road. Could…could he have been following orders from…our lord?”

Situ Jin stopped walking. Instead of answering, he posed his own question. “If he weren’t, Sir Yu, what other explanation could there be?”

Yu Xianru had been with the Eastern Depot for many years and understood Situ Jin’s implication right away. Terrified, he quickly replied,

“This servant was only speaking nonsense—absolute nonsense!”

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the gate. A group of men carried in a series of crates and placed them in the Eastern Depot’s courtyard. Yu Xianru’s mind went blank. Pointing at the crates, he asked Situ Jin, “What…what are these?”

“They were confiscated from Liu Guicang’s home,” replied Situ Jin. He walked into the courtyard and opened one of the crates. It was crammed with neatly stacked katana sabers. “Two weeks ago, the authorities in the capital received reports that Liu Guicang was plotting a rebellion. His so-called ‘Wuminggui Execution Assembly’ in Liuzhou was just a cover—in truth, he was gathering conspirators. The depot chief acted decisively, galloping over five hundred miles to kill that conspiracy in the cradle.”

“But…but shouldn’t this have been reported to the Liuzhou garrison so the garrison soldiers could arrest him? How…how…” Yu Xianru, whose life had proceeded smoothly until now, had never heard anything so shocking. He wiped sweat from his face. “B-besides, Liu Guicang was a martial artist. He opened a number of training halls. It makes sense that his residence would be stocked with weapons—”

Situ Jin interrupted him, opening the final box to reveal the gleaming firearms inside. “Did it make sense for him to hoard firearms too?” He picked one up and weighed it in his hand. “This is a Wulei Shenji matchlock, explicitly banned from private possession by imperial decree. That treacherous scoundrel knowingly violated the law. What kind of sense does that make, I wonder?”

Seeing the firearms, Yu Xianru was completely dumbfounded. “Commander Situ, I-I had no knowledge of this!” he gasped. “To think that

traitor was hoarding firearms! He deserves ten thousand deaths! Thank heavens the depot chief arrived in time—otherwise, Liu Guicang would've bathed Liuzhou in blood!"

Situ Jin carried on indifferently. "As for why the depot chief came here personally, rather than sending orders to Liuzhou… Exactly how much silver did you take from Liu Guicang, Sir Yu? If the local garrison had been the ones to seize his account books, rather than the depot chief, I'm afraid you couldn't have escaped a guilty charge. The depot chief disguised himself as a Garden assassin to avoid a public panic. He didn't want news of Liu Guicang's planned rebellion to erupt. That would certainly have lowered the people's morale."

Situ Jin's words struck Yu Xianru's mind like a thunderbolt. He was so scared that his legs trembled and nearly gave out. After a moment, he realized the depot chief had saved his life, and his eyes instantly welled with grateful tears. He dropped to his knees and pressed his head to ground repeatedly. "Thank you for saving my life, Depot Chief! Thank you!"

Situ Jin shook his head at Sir Yu's groveling and didn't bother with him further. He walked toward the back rooms, passing through the hall and down a winding walkway. The side room's red-lacquered door soon became faintly visible among the trees.

Situ Jin approached the door and bowed. "Depot Chief, the matter has been handled as you instructed," he reported. "The entire Eastern Depot will now be convinced that Liu Guicang rebelled."

"Good," rasped a hoarse voice from inside the room. "Come in."

Situ Jin entered the room. Shen Jue half reclined on a luohan bed, his ink-black hair spilling over the bed's inner railing. He wore only a plain

white inner robe, collar open, revealing the bandages wrapped around his body. He didn't look at Situ Jin but gazed through the window at the spider flowers outside. They blossomed in clusters like misty, dreamlike clouds.

"What did Wei De tell you to say?" Shen Jue asked indifferently.

"Depot Chief, you left your post without permission and disappeared without notice," Situ Jin said with downcast eyes. "Wei-gonggong is furious. He says it wouldn't matter if you were on your deathbed—you must return to the palace at once. If you don't…"

Shen Jue's gaze swept toward Situ Jin, cold as frost. "If I don't…?"

"If you don't, he'll send you back to the Cold Palace to sweep courtyards and forbid you from entering the Directorate of Ceremonial ever again."

"I see." Shen Jue sat up. "In that case, we depart tomorrow."

"Understood." Situ Jin again bowed deeply but didn't leave. Shen Jue looked at him. "Depot Chief, forgive your servant for overstepping. Your trip this time wasn't to kill Liu Guicang but to save the Wuminggui. And that Wuminggui…he was Sixi-gonggong from the Cold Palace, wasn't he?"

"Situ Jin, you talk too much."

"On the night the late Noble Consort was assassinated, the depot chief risked his life to sneak into the imperial physician's office to steal medicine for his sick roommate, Sixi-gonggong. Later, your humble subordinate heard that Sixi-gonggong escaped from the palace, never to be found. He wasn't Sixi after all; he was the injured assassin."

Shen Jue's gaze was icy. "Situ Jin, I never knew you were so nosy."

Situ Jin continued softly. “Back then, you said he was the person who most cared for you. You have risked life and limb for him time and time again. Why not seize this chance to take him away? Qiye Garden…is but a living hell.”

“Has spending too much time with women turned you into a chatterbox?” Shen Jue asked impatiently. “Dismissed!”

Situ Jin bowed with clasped hands. “Your humble subordinate has already discreetly arranged for their safe passage beyond the city walls. The depot chief need not worry. May the depot chief continue to look after his own health.” Situ Jin retreated a few steps, then turned and left.

Shen Jue remained silent. Only after Situ Jin was long gone did he stand and look back out the window at the dazzling spider flowers.

“The time isn’t right just yet. The antidote for Seven Fifteen isn’t finished, and Wei De is still alive. If I can’t even protect myself, how…how could I protect him?”

He thought of Xiahou Lian’s warm body pressed tightly against his as they charged the chopping block on horseback. That was the first time in seven years that they’d been so close, moving as if they shared one heart and mind. A faint smile touched his lips. Shen Jue reached out and touched a delicate petal that bowed toward the window.

“A-Lian,” he said hoarsely, “wait for me.”

Chapter 49:
Ashes of Calamity

IN THE DIRECTORATE of Ceremonial's Room of Inner Duties, a sharp slap rang out as Wei De's hand struck Shen Jue's cheek. It left a red mark like smudged makeup, but Shen Jue didn't so much as groan; it was as if he felt no pain whatsoever. Instead he said, "Please calm your anger, Father," quickly dropping to his knees. His forehead touched the cold, cracked floor tiles, the chill seeping into his entire body.

"Shen Jue, how dare you?!" Wei De paced back and forth, his face flushed with rage. "You've grown bold, haven't you? Do you think I can't control you anymore? Leaving the capital without permission, taking our men, and killing Liu Guicang—that bastard may have stirred up trouble in the jianghu, but he made us generous offerings every year. I promised him that the Eastern Depot wouldn't interfere in the jianghu, and now you go and slap me in the face the moment I turn my back!"

"Father, please let me explain!" Shen Jue shuffled forward a few steps and kowtowed again. "Last month, the Eastern Depot received a secret report from Liuzhou accusing Liu Guicang of gathering forces from across the jianghu to stage a rebellion. I dared not delay for even a moment. I rode through the night to apprehend him!"

Wei De let out a cold laugh, the wrinkles on his weathered face deepening like the furrows in old tree bark. "So what? Should I thank you now? Or petition the emperor to reward you? Shen Jue, you little brat!" His anger rising, Wei De approached Shen Jue and delivered a fierce kick. The force sent the younger man sprawling, knocking his gilded official cap from

his head. Shen Jue calmly picked up the rolling cap, put it back on, and knelt in his original position.

"Don't think I don't know about your *great deeds*! Rebellion? Firearms?!" Wei De downed several cups of tea in frustration, then pointed at Shen Jue. "Wasn't it you who spread rumors about Liu Guicang's wife having an affair? What personal grudge did you have against him? Regardless, I could still have overlooked that—venting a little anger is inconsequential. But I thought you were level-headed, the kind of man who'd never let a personal vendetta cloud his judgment. Yet look at you now! The Eastern Depot's chief running off to Liuzhou without a word and killing Liu Guicang! What am I supposed to do if the scholar-officials in the imperial court find out about this?"

"Father, anyone could've uncovered Liu Guicang's annual tributes to us! Protecting a jianghu troublemaker like him didn't benefit you in any way. Just last month, Eastern Depot spies spotted the servants of Left Vice-Censor-in-Chief Meng Jian in Liuzhou. They were probably there to investigate the matter. I admit I acted on a grudge, but your safety was my primary concern! Think about it: Liu Guicang invited the jianghu to witness the execution ceremony. The censors are masters of twisting words, and they would've convinced the emperor that Liu Guicang was a dissident even if he had had no intention of rebellion. Moreover, your son was so concerned that our intelligence was faulty that I went there myself disguised as a Garden assassin. Nobody knows that it was the Eastern Depot's doing. Father, my rash actions certainly deserve punishment, but please try to quell your anger!" Shen Jue prostrated himself again; his forehead struck the ground so hard that blood began to bead, leaving tiny crimson smears on the tiles.

“I see that you have no remorse whatsoever!” Still unmoved, Wei De sat in his black-lacquered, gold-inlaid chair, gazing coldly at Shen Jue. Even when Shen Jue knelt, his posture was as straight as a bamboo stalk in the wind. With a slight furrow of his brow, Wei De continued offhandedly, “You’ve always been stubborn and headstrong, and now you’re clearly beyond my control. Fine. I’m too old to waste time arguing with a troublemaker. Pack your things, Shen Jue. I’m sending you back to the Cold Palace.”

Shen Jue, seemingly rooted to the spot, didn’t move. After a long pause, he straightened and bowed deeply to Wei De. “I’ve failed you. I’ve served by your side all these years, but I’ve done little to ease your burdens. Now that I can no longer stay by your side, I only hope you’ll take care of yourself and not allow court affairs to exhaust you. Please be cautious with Meng Jian; he’s ambitious. I wish you health and peace. Farewell!”

Wei De’s teacup trembled in his hand, splashing liquid onto his python-embroidered robe. Still, he didn’t move as he watched Shen Jue lower his head with a sorrowful expression, then shuffle backward, preparing to rise and leave. Impulsively, Wei De reached out and called, “Wait!”

Shen Jue froze. At the same moment, hurried footsteps echoed from outside.

“Wei-gonggong!” the approaching eunuch called. “His Majesty summons you.”

Wei De froze then rushed to the window. “Do you know why?”

“I don’t,” the eunuch replied hesitantly. “But judging by His Majesty’s expression, it isn’t good.”

Wei De glanced at Shen Jue. “Could this be about you killing Liu Guicang?”

Shen Jue shook his head. “No one knows that was me. However…” He pulled a folded memorial from his sleeve and handed it to Wei De. “Read this on the way, Father. It may help resolve the matter.”

Wei De accepted the memorial suspiciously, staring at Shen Jue for a moment before departing in a swirl of robes. Wei De didn’t see the subtle change that washed over Shen Jue’s face. His sorrow peeled away like chipped gold leaf from an old incense burner to reveal only cold indifference.

Wei De hunched low as he hastened obsequiously into Zhaoren Hall, where the emperor came to read books and review memorials. The walls were lined with towering shelves tightly packed with rows of books bound in blue and black. The emperor was not particularly fond of reading and had tucked a few erotic illustrations among the texts—an indulgence unknown to outsiders. In the center of the room stood a huanghuali wood desk piled with memorials and documents. Whatever the emperor discarded, his attendants promptly sorted.

The emperor sat in a high-backed chair, his expression dark with displeasure. A eunuch at his side gave Wei De a pointed glance. Wei De’s heart sank. He knelt shakily before the emperor, unsure what to expect. The emperor usually stopped him from doing so and helped him to his feet. For the first time ever, though, he provided no assistance, allowing Wei De to perform the full obeisance. Then the emperor tossed a memorial at his feet.

“Read it,” the emperor ordered.

Wei De picked the memorial up, his heart pounding harder with each line he read. As the words blurred before his eyes, cold sweat trickled down his spine. Without even reading to the end, he let out a desperate cry, dropping to his knees to crawl to the emperor's feet. "Your Majesty, please judge wisely! This servant has nothing to do with wretched Liu Guicang! Meng Jian has slandered me with baseless accusations! What tributes? What offerings? These are all fabrications! Your Majesty, I have served you all my life. Don't you know the kind of person I am? I'm a coward—how could I dare to associate with lawless jianghu rogues?!"

"Meng Jian's family has been loyal for generations! Why would he invent a charge of collusion with rebel outlaws?" The emperor was livid, nearly speechless with rage. "Your man, Qian Zhengde, was seen eating and drinking with this Liu fellow—Liu…whatever-his-name-is! You've lost your mind, Wei De!" The emperor gestured angrily at the desk, which was piled with memorials. "Look at these—every one is a complaint against you! Zuo Lanjiang, the left assistant minister of the Court of Judicial Review; He Siming, academician of Hanlin Academy; Ye Zhi, the minister of justice; even the retired Dai Shengyan, known for his integrity—have all accused you! Dai Shengyan claims that you were involved in annihilating the Xie family nine years ago. Of course, I know you'd never commit such a monstrous crime, but I must provide an explanation!"

Wei De trembled uncontrollably, fumbling to retrieve a memorial from his sleeve. "Your Majesty, please read this before passing judgment!"

The emperor snatched the memorial and skimmed it, his eyes rapidly scanning the text.

Wei De mopped his brow and continued his plea. "This servant has no connection with Liu Guicang! The only possible link is that Eastern

Depot spies reported that Liu Guicang was in frequent contact with southern barbarians, likely to plot something sinister. I didn't want to accuse an innocent man, so I ordered a thorough investigation. Just last month, the Eastern Depot received a secret report that Liu Guicang had issued a call to the jianghu, summoning people from all corners of the land to Liuzhou. Our spies also reported that southern barbarians disguised as martial artists were heading to the gathering. Fearing rebellion, I ordered my unworthy son, Shen Jue, to rush to Liuzhou and execute Liu Guicang at once!"

The emperor's anger flared. "What?! A jianghu ruffian dared to collude with those southern barbarians?!"

"Your Majesty may not know, but Liu Guicang's mother was herself a barbarian from the south," Wei De said, wiping his eyes. "Rebellion is no trivial matter. Better to err on the side of caution—better to kill ten thousand wrongly than to let even one traitor slip through. Though the evidence wasn't concrete at the time, I had no choice but to let Shen Jue take decisive action. Liu Guicang claimed to be executing the Wuminggui, a Garden assassin, and I secretly ordered Shen Jue to disguise himself as a fellow Garden assassin to rescue the Wuminggui and eliminate Liu Guicang. Thankfully, Shen Jue succeeded. Afterward, the Eastern Depot discovered over three hundred firearms at Liu's villa. Your Majesty, Great Qi's Divine Mechanisms Camp has five hundred firearms at most!"

The emperor trembled with rage as he reread the memorial several times. Then he noticed Wei De still weeping at his feet and hastily helped him up. "I've wronged you, old friend! Looking at this now, it seems that Qian Zhengde was the traitor, and you've been dragged into his mess!"

Wei De nodded repeatedly. “Rest assured, Your Majesty—I’ll deal with that treacherous dog myself!”

“Punishments must be balanced with rewards,” the emperor said, tapping his desk. “Shen Jue has performed admirably—he deserves recognition. As it happens, Consort Li has a maid named Zhuxia, a lovely girl who’s been recommended more than once. Shen Jue is no longer young, and although he went under the knife, he should have someone by his side to care for him. Let’s arrange for them to marry. That way, Zhuxia can keep serving Consort Li, and everyone will be pleased.”

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LATER, GOLDEN SUNLIGHT STRETCHED into the room, casting Shen Jue’s silhouette onto the floor in a long, lone shadow. When Wei De left, he forgot to close the door behind him. Eunuchs and maids carrying trays occasionally passed the doorway and glanced curiously at Shen Jue kneeling within.

Their murmurs reached his ears, but his heart had long since grown numb. No words could sting him now. Despite the June heat, a chill seeped into his chest, cold enough to make him shiver. The Forbidden City had been stocked with ice to cool the main halls, and the emperor even enjoyed chilled fruit daily, yet Shen Jue now felt an icy breeze drill into his core.

He recalled a time many years ago, back when he was Xie Jinglan. Newly apprenticed, he’d just learned that his so-called father didn’t even know what he looked like. Trying to comfort him, Xiahou Lian had hugged

him in the garden, saying “Hugs can cure all sadness.” Shen Jue closed his eyes and tried to summon the memory of that embrace, of Xiahou Lian’s voice. Slowly, it began to feel real—like Xiahou Lian was there beside him, holding him again, hands firm on his shoulders, radiating warmth like winter coals.

It was worth it, Shen Jue thought. *As long as Xiahou Lian is safe, it was all worth it.* A faint smile curved his lips as a single tear slipped down his cheek and splattered into countless droplets on the floor.

Hurried footsteps sounded outside. Immediately recognizing them as Wei De’s, Shen Jue wiped the tears from his face and quickly replaced his smile with a sorrowful expression.

The hem of Wei De’s python-patterned robe brushed Shen Jue’s arm as his godfather approached.

“Oh, goodness!” Wei De exclaimed, then helped him up. “Why are you so stubborn, my child? Do you really not know to stand and rest if I don’t order you to get up?” Chiding Shen Jue lightly, Wei De pulled him into the main hall to sit down.

“A son who errs should kneel to learn his lesson,” Shen Jue responded, lowering his head.

“Erred in what regard?” Wei De shook his head and sighed. “It’s all my fault. Your father was blinded by greed, chasing after such trivial benefits. I accused you mistakenly! I’m thankful that you killed that wretched traitor; otherwise, I’d have been dragged down with him!”

“It was presumptuous of me to act on my own. I won’t dare to do so again. Please forgive me, Father.” Shen Jue began to kneel again, but Wei De grasped his arm firmly and pressed him back into his seat.

“Jue-er, do you know why I picked you out from the Cold Palace all those years ago?” Wei De stood up. The sky outside darkened, and the lanterns lit up one by one. He gazed through the soft, gauzy curtains at the faint glow of those lanterns as if peering into distant memories.

“Because I saved you from the horse that day?” guessed Shen Jue.

“No, not because you saved my life—because I saw myself in you.” Wei De absently rubbed the tourmaline beads in his hand. “Before His Majesty ascended to the throne, he was just a despised, neglected prince. And who was I? Just some insignificant eunuch. I was like grass on the roadside; anyone who passed by was free to trample me. But I refused to resign myself to that fate. I served His Majesty with all my heart, hoping for the day when I might rise over everyone. Look at me now! I’ve been blessed by the heavens. His Majesty is emperor, and I’ve gained power in this Forbidden City. On the hunting grounds, Jue-er, I looked in your eyes and saw the same defiance I’d once had!”

“Even such ambition would mean nothing without your guidance, Father. Without you, there would be no Shen Jue today.” Shen Jue handed Wei De a cup of tea.

Patting his shoulder lightly, Wei De accepted the cup. “Keep working hard, Son. You’re nothing like Qian Zhengde’s useless bunch—they’ll never amount to anything. Deep down, they see themselves as mere slaves. How could they ever achieve successes with that mindset? You and I are different; we’re the same kind of person. But I’m old, worn out. Sooner or later, I’ll have to let go. One day, all this”—Wei De gestured around the Directorate of Ceremonial—“will be yours.”

Yes. All mine. Beneath his robe's richly embroidered sleeves, Shen Jue's fingers tensed and went pale. He lowered his head so that Wei De could not see the cold smirk on his lips nor the darkness roiling in his eyes—only hear him say, as softly and politely as always, "Father, you will live to a ripe old age. Just staying by your side as your humble messenger is enough for me."

Shen Jue left the Forbidden City before the palace gates locked for the night. At the Shen mansion, Fang Cunzheng had been awaiting him for hours. When Shen Jue returned, dusty from travel, Fang Cunzheng greeted him warmly. His sharp eyes automatically noticed the red imprint on Shen Jue's cheek, and his heart sank, pounding hard in his chest. Quickly averting his gaze, Fang bowed even lower, pretending not to have noticed the mark.

Shen Wenxing brought a towel and basin, his face twisting in distress as he dabbed warm water on Shen Jue's cheek to soothe the inflammation. In his mind, he cursed Wei De over and over.

"How's the antidote going?" Shen Jue asked as he washed his hands.

Fang Cunzheng beamed and presented him with a small box of purple sandalwood. Shen Jue took the box and opened it. Inside lay a tiny black pill, along with a sheet of rice paper on which the pill's ingredients were neatly transcribed.

"Depot Chief, this is a sample of the antidote to Seven Fifteen, as well as the formula," Fang Cunzheng said eagerly, bowing low. "We've tested it on each of the test subjects—they're strong and lively again. Some will eat four bowls of rice in one sitting!"

"You're certain?" Shen Jue asked.

“Absolutely! I wouldn’t dare deceive you,” Fang Cunzheng swore, his gestures exaggerated. Grinning broadly, he added, “The antidote doesn’t have a name yet. Please, Depot Chief, bestow it with one.”

Shen Jue stared silently into the box for a long time. The thumb-sized black pill gleamed like polished obsidian beneath the lamplight, its surface smooth and flawless. “Let’s call it Hope’s Return,” he finally murmured.

“An excellent name! Brilliant!” Fang Cunzheng praised him effusively.

Shen Jue closed the box with a troubled expression. “The existence of Hope’s Return must not be revealed to Wei De. How should we handle all the people at your estate?”

Eyes darting about the room, Fang Cunzheng took a step closer. “Dead men’s mouths are the most reliably shut. Why not burn them all and be done with it, Depot Chief?”

“Good idea,” Shen Jue replied coldly.

Feeling that he had offered wise counsel, Fang Cunzheng nodded enthusiastically.

“And you?” Shen Jue’s asked, his sharp, frosty gaze shifting to Fang Cunzheng.

Fang Cunzheng froze, a chill running down his spine. “D-Depot Chief, wh-what do you mean?” he stammered.

“Do you take me for a fool, Fang Cunzheng?” Shen Jue sneered. “You already arranged buyers; you planned to deliver the goods tomorrow. Unfortunately for you, all your buyers are dead now.”

Black smoke suddenly billowed from the west. “There’s a fire in the western city!” someone outside shouted.

The smoke was coming from the direction of Fang Cunzheng’s estate and test subjects. Shen Jue shielded his eyes and looked toward the horizon. “Your suggestion was excellent—I’ve already implemented it. You’re right: Dead men’s mouths *are* the most reliably shut. Yours included.”

Without warning, one of Shen Jue’s agents appeared behind Fang Cunzheng and covered his mouth. A flash of cold steel sliced across his throat, and Fang Cunzheng collapsed instantly.

Shen Jue lowered his gaze to the small box in his hand and traced its intricate patterns with his fingers, each touch lingering with strange affection. “Send out an order that the Wuminggui of Qiye Garden be immediately captured. Remember, though, he is not to suffer even the slightest injury.”

Shen Wenxing hesitated. “What about Wei-gonggong?” he asked.

“Keep it completely hidden from him,” Shen Jue replied darkly. “Direct only my most trusted subordinates to capture Xiahou Lian. The rest of the Eastern Depot is not to interfere. As for the other Garden assassins, kill them or capture them—but spare none. That will create confusion and ensure that Wei De suspects nothing.”

“I fear that Master Xiahou Lian may misunderstand your intentions.”

“He won’t,” Shen Jue murmured, stroking the sandalwood box in his hand. “His mother will tell him that his only chance for survival lies with me.”

Chapter 50:
A Boundless Heart

THE MOON HUNG FAINT over the treetops, white tinged with blue, like an overturned porcelain dish. Dark clouds occasionally passed before it, resembling the dish's cracked glaze.

Liushao-er lay alone in her carved canopy bed, the beaded curtains pulled back. Moonlight streamed through the half-open lattice window and fell directly onto her. She lazily waved a round fan, her eyes fixed on a painted scene of a scholar and maiden in red and green. Suddenly, inexplicable frustration overtook her, and she threw her fan aside. It clattered to the floor and slid underneath a lacquered incense table, vanishing.

The girl went to the trunk that held her newly purchased dresses and lifted the lid. Layered inside were a crimson-and-gold patterned vest, a richly embroidered mamianqun, and a silver-red jacket adorned with gold-threaded blossoms, each more exquisite than the last. Liushao-er tried on each garment, strutting back and forth in front of the mirror. Assured that not even a princess could rival her beauty, she finally returned to bed, satisfied.

She was in the midst of sweet dreams, when a pair of cold hands slid under her blanket. She startled awake with a shriek, scrambling upright, clutching her blanket. "Help!" she cried. "A ravisher!"

The intruder clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling her sharp cries. "Liushao-er! Liushao-er! It's me!"

Liushao-er squinted in the darkness and realized the intruder was indeed Shu Qing. He looked worn; his beard was unkempt and his face dusty from travel. Liushao-er pressed her hand to her heart, taking several deep breaths to calm down. Then she snapped, “Are you trying to kill me, scaring me like that?!” Her eyes reddened as tears threatened to fall. “You scoundrel! You’ve been gone for *months*. You may have sent word at first, but then there was nothing. I thought you were like other men—abandoning your bride!”

Shu Qing smiled apologetically. “But I’ve sent you money every month, haven’t I? Things got so busy I couldn’t send any more letters.”

Liushao-er lifted her porcelain-white chin and retorted bitterly, “I wouldn’t care if you abandoned me! At least my face is still pretty enough to keep me from starving.”

“What are you talking about?!” Shu Qing barked, growing anxious. Then, seeing the redness rimming Liushao-er’s eyes—as if she’d brushed makeup over her lashes and brows—his heart softened, and he lowered his voice. “Liushao-er, believe me, I’ll never leave you. Even if I die, I’ll first ensure that you have enough money to live comfortably for the rest of your life.”

As the moon shifted east, the window lattice fractured its light into pale shards that resembled shattered porcelain. Liushao-er helped Shu Qing undress, hanging his clothes on a rosewood rack. His shoes were filthy, so she placed them by the door for the maid to clean the next morning.

They lay side by side, holding each other close.

Liushao-er nestled into Shu Qing’s arms. “Erlang, the autumn exams are approaching. Please stop following Xiahou Lian around and focus on

studying," she pleaded. "It's the proper thing to do."

"I… I…" Shu Qing stammered.

"He's your sworn brother, and I know he's helped us plenty with money, but he's not a respectable man," she continued. "For now, we can rely on him for funds, but once you pass the exam and become an official, you must stop associating with him."

Shu Qing's heart twisted in knots. He wanted to follow Xiahou Lian's advice and tell her he was a murderer and a fugitive, but the words wouldn't come. After stammering for ages, he finally muttered, "Liushao-er, I'm not going to take the imperial exams. Don't bother thinking about it."

Liushao-er sat up abruptly. "What? Why? Doesn't Xiahou Lian want to support you anymore?"

Shu Qing sat up as well and hung his head. "I'm not cut out for studying. Give up on that dream. I'm fine working with my shige—that's all. Stop bringing it up." He lay back down and turned his back to her. No matter how many times Liushao-er swatted him, he refused to respond.

Liushao-er sat on the bed in a daze, staring at her pale hands and feet as the icy moonlight illuminated them. Her skin was so white that her limbs seemed almost transparent.

She had seen plenty of men like Shu Qing and Xiahou Lian—men drifting through the jianghu, cobbling together a trade or doing odd jobs for their superiors. Some were lucky enough to strike it rich, but most sank midway and never resurfaced. As long as Shu Qing worked under someone else's thumb, he would live a precarious, day-to-day existence.

Xiahou Lian, on the other hand, did have some grit, and the kind of sharp, determined gaze that suggested he could earn money. The dresses in

her trunk and the jewelry in her vanity—she'd received them from Shu Qing, but they'd been bought with Xiahou Lian's money, hadn't they? Still, Xiahou Lian was Xiahou Lian, and Shu Qing was just a fool—if he couldn't pass the exams, he'd amount to nothing.

Liushao-er had investigated his situation long ago. Shu Qing was a pauper with no parents, family, or pedigree. Once, he'd roamed the jianghu with a master, and now he wandered with Xiahou Lian. There was no future for someone like him.

Liushao-er lowered the bed curtains, shutting out the moonlight. Darkness fell instantly. She lay down beside Shu Qing, who was already fast asleep from exhaustion, and gradually closed her eyes as she listened to his deep breaths.

The next day, Shu Qing left with Xiahou Lian. Liushao-er stood on a high balcony, silently watching the pair sail away in a canal boat. Dressed in black hemp, Xiahou Lian squatted on a sack of salt and talked to the boatmen. Beside him, wearing a pale blue scholar's robe, was Shu Qing, who was still waving to her. Liushao-er silently turned away and led her maid inside.

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XIAHOU LIAN RETURNED to the Garden. He rarely went back there except to pay respects to Xiahou Pei and celebrate the New Year. The Garden village at the foot of the mountain was as tiny and unremarkable as ever with its tightly packed clusters of thatched cottages. In a small clearing

between houses, half-grown children sparred with wooden swords. When they saw Xiahou Lian and Shu Qing ride past, they stopped mid-swing to watch, their expressions as sharp and cold as iron that had rusted in a grave for years.

Xiahou Lian knew that their eyes were on the blade that hung at his horse's flank. For these children, possessing a blade meant earning their plaque and being able to leave the mountain; what they didn't know was that most who left didn't make it back.

Xiahou Lian first ascended the Black-Faced Buddha Peak to visit his brother. Chiyan had returned from the Oirats a few days earlier with a gold-inlaid glass earring for Xiahou Lian—one Chiyan had apparently taken from the ear of a decapitated head. Such items were highly prized in the Oirats, reserved for the elite and affluent.

"You're not seriously suggesting that I pierce my ears, are you?" Xiahou Lian asked, flipping the earring back and forth in the sunlight. The transparent glass refracted a dazzling spectrum of color.

Chiyan brushed aside his hair to reveal a matching earring in his right ear. The pale glass glinted like Chiyan's own eyes—clear and flawless, reflecting the ever-changing sky and clouds, the splendor of the world. At that point, Xiahou Lian realized that Chiyan had only given him one earring.

"Why wear something so delicate? You look ridiculous," Xiahou Lian scoffed, eyeing the earring critically. "It's far too feminine."

"Oirat men wear them too," Chiyan replied simply. "Matching earrings—one for you and one for me. They're perfect."

Xiahou Lian frowned and tucked the earring into his pouch. “We’re from Great Qi, not the Oirats. You couldn’t pay me to wear it.”

Looking slightly crestfallen, Chiyan said nothing, turning instead to watch the sunset. The sun hung low on the horizon, half-submerged, like a red paper cutout torn in two and pasted onto the sky. The mountain wind swept over them, cool against their faces, as the pair sat atop the peak, surrounded by clouds and the ink-black silhouettes of distant summits. Feathery mists drifted by lazily, shifting and flowing.

“Chiyan, do you know where the Garden’s archive is?” Xiahou Lian suddenly asked.

That archive was his reason for returning. The Garden followed strict protocols, documenting every assassination mission in meticulous detail. Their records included a target’s biography, tastes, and assets, as well as the assassination’s time, location, and weather conditions, in addition to the designated executioner. All those records were stored in the archive.

Before her final mission, his mother had promised him that she’d ask the Garden for a sheath. But when Xiahou Lian went to Liuzhou to find her, no one seemed to recognize that the person lying dead in the northern market was Xiahou Pei. At the time, he’d assumed that Xiahou Pei had lied to him. Now, it seemed more likely that she’d requested a single sheath, who hadn’t come to her assistance at all but had somehow evaded punishment from Qiye Garden.

If Xiahou Lian could locate Xiahou Pei’s records, he might discover the sheath’s identity—and the truth behind his mother’s death.

Chiyan remained silent for a long while. Only when the sun had almost fully set did he lower his gaze and ask, “Do the dead matter that

much? Are they more important than the living?”

Xiahou Lian froze. “What do you mean?” he asked, turning to look at Chiyan. Chiyan’s head remained bowed, the shadow of his lashes falling over his eyes, which gave him an uncharacteristically solemn expression.

Chiyan said nothing more. Instead, he stood and led Xiahou Lian to a hidden cave, pulling aside a curtain of vines to reveal a dark opening half a man’s height. The entrance gaped like the maw of some wild beast poised to devour any who dared approach.

“The Black-Faced Buddha is hollow,” Chiyan explained. “The archive is hidden in its belly.”

“So the abbot climbs in through here!” Xiahou Lian exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell me so earlier? I’ve been scaling the mountain every time I come to see you!”

“You aren’t allowed inside,” Chiyan murmured. “But…” He lifted his gaze to meet Xiahou Lian’s, his large, dark eyes calm and serene. “Whatever you wish, I’ll help you make it happen.”

Feeling a twinge of guilt, Xiahou Lian awkwardly offered his thanks before bowing slightly and preparing to enter the cave.

Chiyan suddenly stopped him. “Xiahou Lian, do you want to be abbot?” he asked.

Xiahou Lian turned back, puzzled. “Why would I want that? I have no interest in becoming a bald monk who chants prayers all day.”

Chiyan said no more, letting the vines fall back into place and plunging the cave into darkness. Xiahou Lian lit a fire starter and blew, and a flame roared to life. He paused for a moment, replaying Chiyan’s question in his mind. Vague discomfort stirred within him. Chiyan, a man without

personal desires, had made Xiahou Lian's wishes his own, and he felt that he owed Chiyan something. The glass earring suddenly seemed heavier in his pouch as Xiahou Lian realized he'd never thought to bring a gift for Chiyan.

Sighing, he pushed the thought aside and focused on descending the staircase. The steps extended endlessly, at least a hundred in number, before opening into a spacious underground room. Tables cluttered with jars and containers lined the space. As Xiahou Lian stepped forward, his foot struck something round. He bent down to pick up a small pill.

Several potted plants were arranged against the wall. At their center stood a leafless flower with a single palm-sized red blossom. Its layers of narrow petals curled inward like blood-stained fangs, exuding an eerie, unsettling beauty.

This must be where the abbot makes his addictive drugs, Xiahou Lian thought as he surveyed the room. He considered burning the place down and putting a stop to the abbot's abuse, but he decided to avoid creating unnecessary trouble and focus on his mission.

Faint moans echoed from deeper within the cavern. Xiahou Lian extinguished his flame and crept forward in the dark. The sounds grew louder until he reached a dim cavern. There, mats were laid along the walls, each occupied by a pallid figure. Some emitted weak groans, their mouths hanging half-open, while others lay completely silent; it seemed they were already beyond saving. Most were likely already dead.

Xiahou Lian recognized a few faces—one was a defector Qiu Ye had captured last year. Xiahou Lian had assumed the man was executed, but here he was.

Xiahou Lian did not linger but continued downward, finally reaching the archive itself. The towering shelves that filled the space were crowded close together, leaving barely enough room to walk between them. Dust clung to the old records. Xiahou Lian scanned the shelves until he eventually found a section labeled *Garuda*. The records inside detailed the lives of the successive assassins who'd held that title. Turning to the end, he found a portrait of Xiahou Pei.

The drawing, done by some unknown artist, actually bore little resemblance to Xiahou Pei beyond the facial features—the woman in the portrait had a lively expression and a gentle smile, resembling an innocent young maiden rather than a bloodstained assassin. Even so, as Xiahou Lian touched the small painting, his eyes grew red.

Brushing away his tears, he flipped further into the file. The records detailed every assassination Xiahou Pei had carried out from ages twelve to thirty-five. Xiahou Lian skipped to her final mission only to find that the page had been torn out, leaving only the jagged remnant of the page edge, like a row of yellowing teeth.

Though he'd half-expected this outcome, Xiahou Lian still felt the sting of disappointment. His faint hope slipped away like sand through his fingers. After standing frozen for a moment, he flipped through earlier entries:

Summer, the twenty-eighth year of the Qianyuan era, fourth month, Dingsi day.[20] *Heavy rain. The Garuda killed Ye Xiu of the Water Transport Guild on a street in southern Qingzhou.*

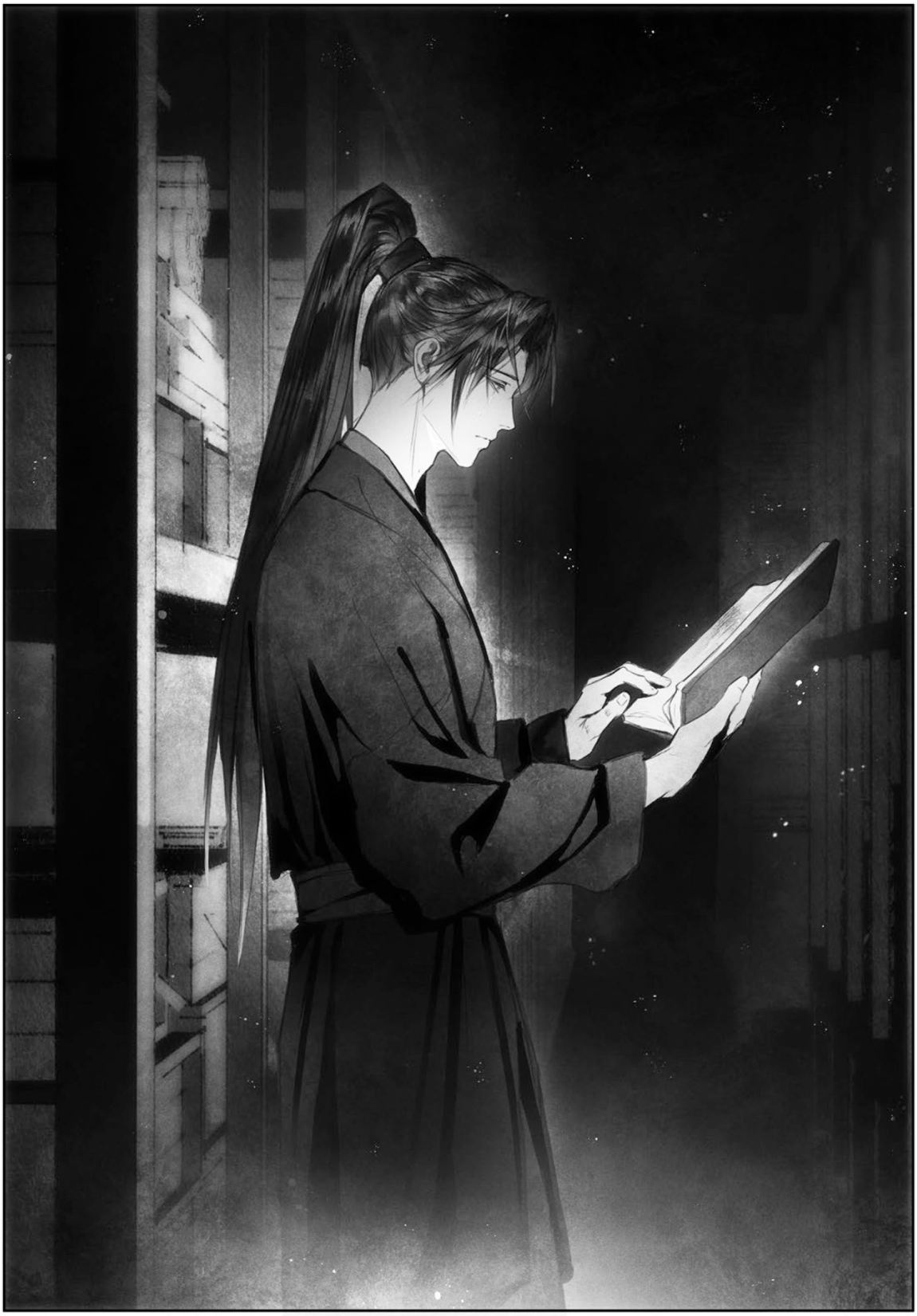
Autumn, the twenty-seventh year of the Qianyuan era, seventh month, Dingwei day. Rain. The Garuda killed He family patriarch He Kun on Bai

Chi Cliff beneath the family's archway.

Summer, the twenty-seventh year of the Qianyuan era, sixth month, Jiachen day. Heavy rain. The Garuda pursued Mu Qing, deputy master of the Junzi Blade Sect, in Taoshu's Wujia Village. Surrounded by ten opponents, she killed them all.

Xiahou Lian flipped through several pages, starting from the twenty-sixth year of the Qianyuan Era: *heavy rain… heavy rain… rain… rain… heavy rain*—every record noted rain! A revelation struck him—someone had wanted his mother dead for a very long time. Qingzhou was a coastal city, notorious for its heavy April rains. Baichi Cliff, another coastal location, frequently experienced torrential rain during summer and autumn. Taoshu had the same conditions. Someone had deliberately sent his mother on assassination missions during the rainy season to exacerbate her injuries!

Who could it be? Who had the authority to assign missions to Qiye Garden's Eight Legions? Who? Xiahou Lian's head throbbed. He knew the answer. A shadowy figure emerged in his mind and slowly came into focus. But why? Xiahou Pei was the Garden's top assassin, their foremost swordswoman, and she had never betrayed the Garden. So why kill her?



Xiahou Lian flipped back to the page with her portrait. There, at the bottom of the page, faint ink recorded the artist's barely visible name.

Shixin, it read.

Xiahou Lian's hands trembled. The file felt impossibly heavy, as though it was going to slip from his grasp. Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"It's me." Qiu Ye stepped out from behind him. "I knew you'd come here."

"Shifu." Xiahou Lian's eyes were red.

Qiu Ye placed the file back on the shelf and whispered, "Let's go. We'll talk outside."

As the words left his lips, footsteps echoed down from the level above. Qiu Ye and Xiahou Lian froze in shock. Xiahou Lian quickly extinguished his light, and the two hid deeper among the shelves.

The footsteps neared, and a man holding a candle appeared just ahead of them. Xiahou Lian crouched low, peering through gaps in the records to get a look at the man's face, but the bookshelves obscured his view; he could only see a flicker of light that cast a long shadow on the wall. The shadow swayed, rising and falling, filling the cavern with a haunting, ghostly presence.

Xiahou Lian's vision began to blur—everywhere he looked, the cave seemed alive with flickering shadows.

The man remained silent, standing exactly where Xiahou Lian had stood moments earlier, then placed his hand on the Garuda files, lingering there for some time. Finally, he pulled out the file and opened it to Xiahou Pei's portrait. Carefully, he tore the page free bit by bit before holding it to

the candle’s flame. Fire danced across the illustration, and Xiahou Lian’s heart clenched painfully. He watched as Xiahou Pei’s bright, smiling face turned to ash that then scattered into the air, vanishing without a trace.

Chapter 51:
Bushenglian

THE CANDLE FLAME FLICKERED, and the shadow on the wall shifted, suddenly splitting in two. The second black shadow that had emerged stood face-to-face with Shixin's shadow. Xiahou Lian was startled, but looking more carefully, he realized that someone had been standing behind Shixin all along, their shadows overlapping. Now that that second person had stepped to one side, there were two distinct shadows. Xiahou Lian tiptoed to the right, peering through the bookshelves to see a man in a black cloak, his face hidden in darkness.

"Ah—why do you torment yourself like this?" the man asked, taking the book from Shixin's hands. "You spent three days and nights painting that thing only for Xiahou to laugh her head off at you. Later, she came to me saying that she must look exactly like the portrait, then asking why the mirror didn't agree! That fool—she only knew how to kill and slaughter, so of course she failed to understand that there was another fool in the Garden—one who still saw her as a woman."

The man's voice was rough and hoarse with a heavy, nasal tone, almost as if he were ill. Xiahou Lian recognized it immediately. The voice belonged to Uncle Duan—the same Uncle Duan who once brought him daggers to play with and fiction books to read. Xiahou Lian's fingertips grew cold, and his heart sank. Suddenly, he didn't want to listen anymore, but he knew he must; whatever they said, he had to hear it.

The silent man with Uncle Duan finally spoke. "Those are old stories. There's no need to tell them again." Xiahou Lian watched him straighten up

slowly, the hem of his black kasaya brushing the bookshelf like the wing of a dark butterfly.

“Do you have regrets, Shixin?” Uncle Duan asked softly. “It’s all right if you do. Xiao-Lian still doesn’t know the truth, and Chiyan never cared about Xiahou Pei. They’re your sons, so if Xiao-Lian finds out someday, just blame it all on me. After all, I was Xiahou’s sheath… I was the one who stood by and watched her die at Liu Guicang’s hands.”

“You’re wrong,” Shixin replied, his voice cold and distant. “People like us don’t have the luxury of regret. We walk the asura’s path, every step on the edge of a blade, every footprint soaked in blood. When we move forward, we at least have the faint hope that the end might be near, but looking back is tantamount to reliving all our past suffering.”

Uncle Duan sighed softly. “So you really won’t recognize him as your son?”

“I’m a sinner, Duan Jiu,” Shixin said, gazing at the flame of the candle in his hand. “Had I not hesitated in my duty back then, ensnared by sentimental attachments, the Eight Legions wouldn’t have perished beneath the snow and ice. Our shifu, our brothers—they wouldn’t have become wandering spirits forever trapped in the Northern wastes, unable to return to the Garden or their homeland. A father’s debts must be repaid by his son. I’ll have no chance to atone, so my child must enter the killing field to slay our fated enemy and bring the Garden’s ancestors home. But how could I ask him to call me his father when I’d be sending him to his death…? Moreover, the Garden’s leader must be unburdened by attachments and move forward without hesitation. That’s my lesson…and that’s his future.”

“When do you plan to tell him this secret?”

“Only the Garden’s leader may know all its secrets. Besides, he isn’t strong enough yet. When he has strength enough to take over and lead the Garden, its secrets will be revealed to him.”

Uncle Duan was silent for a moment. “Remember how good we had it back then, Shixin? All of us sitting by the mountain gate, listening to you play your xun. Xiahou would doze off, and the other assassins would crawl out of bed, furious, to yell at us… Tell me, how did we end up like this?”

“Because of me. It’s all because of me.”

“No, Shixin,” Uncle Duan said with a bitter smile. “It was all fate. If you hadn’t lost that fight to Xiahou, she wouldn’t have kept on challenging you—and you’d never have fallen for her. If we hadn’t been street beggars, they’d never have dragged us to the Garden and into this kind of life. It was all fate.”

“So you believe in fate now, Duan Jiu?” Shixin asked, placing a hand on Uncle Duan’s shoulder.

“I’ve always believed in it. You just never knew,” Uncle Duan replied, grasping Shixin’s hand. “They say those who kill too often are reborn as beasts. We’re old now, Shixin. Soon we’ll be beasts. My wounds won’t heal—they used to flare up every fortnight, and now it’s every other day. Qiu Ye is at his limit. Not even Western salves will heal the sores he got at Miaojiang last year. Old friend, you must hurry… Let Xiao-Lian inherit the title of Garuda now. He’s ready.”

Startled, Xiahou Lian turned to look at Qiu Ye. The light was so dim that, until now, he’d failed to notice how haggard Qiu Ye looked. Had the candlelight shone on him fully, Xiahou Lian would’ve seen that Qiu Ye’s face was pale as paper, with only his lips a dark, withered red.

Qiu Ye gave him a reassuring look and squeezed his hand, urging him to keep listening.

Tears pricked at Xiahou Lian's eyes. "Shifu," he mouthed silently.

Shixin and Uncle Duan chatted a while longer, then walked away. The cave sank back into total darkness. The men's footsteps grew fainter, echoing dully off the stone walls and floor and finally leaving behind deathly silence.

To Xiahou Lian, the leader of Qiye Garden was a shadowy figure in the depths of his memory, ancient and blurred like faded ink on old paper. Shixin was always seated in the main hall, either tapping on a wooden fish with a missing corner or mumbling over tattered scriptures. He remained sitting in the temple like a somber, ancient Buddha while Xiahou Lian ran wild outside.

When Xiahou Lian was a child, and his mother wasn't around, he would climb barefoot up and down the mountain, heedless of whether he scraped his feet on the rocks. He would pick rushes and morning glories, place them on the altar, and use chopsticks to beat a small drum he'd found in a pile of junk, mimicking the abbot's chanting. Sometimes, when there was no rice to eat at home, he snuck past the main hall where the leader meditated, stepping gingerly through the rustling fallen leaves to steal rice from the backyard storeroom. He remembered the thin wire lockpick he hid under the crab-apple tree—turn the lock twice to the right, give it a tap, and it clicked open. He would chase the sunset, picking up stones to throw at crows, sometimes even hitting the abbot's bald head. He would chase chickens and ducks, growing up as a nuisance to everyone; any assassin who heard running footsteps outside knew that the little Xiahou rascal was up to no good again.

In all that time, the abbot had never scolded him. Xiahou Lian stole rice, oil, even the incense and fruit from the altar, but the Garden's leader looked the other way, simply flipping a page in his scripture and continuing his chants. Later, when Xiahou Lian learned that the abbot was his biological father, he'd run to the temple, but he still saw only the abbot's dark, unapproachable back. Xiahou Lian had kicked over all the water buckets in the courtyard, spilling water everywhere. It flowed over the mossy stone steps, reflecting the abbot's unmoving back and Xiahou Lian's tear-streaked face.

For years, the Garden's leader had remained that same figure—once taller, now growing thinner and more hunched, but always dark and cold. Xiahou Lian had never known what kind of person the abbot truly was; he rarely spoke, acted, or questioned Xiahou Lian. Now he knew. The abbot was neither the Buddha Qiu Ye had spoken of, nor a "old bald donkey," as Xiahou Pei had called him. He was the Garden's fiercest demon, its most malevolent ghost.

At Heimianfo's summit, Chiyan played the xun. The melody drifted like wind through the valley, coming from nowhere and vanishing into nowhere as well.

"Chiyan," Xiahou Lian called.

Chiyan turned his head and regarded his twin quietly.

"Down below, I had a brush with the abbot and Uncle Duan," Xiahou Lian said.

"Mm-hmm."

"You knew all along, didn't you?" Xiahou Lian's voice was eerily calm. "Back when you captured the Liu Clan disciples for me to practice

on… The abbot ordered that, didn't he?"

Chiyan nodded. He never lied; he answered whatever he was asked without a single false word. For no reason, Xiahou Lian suddenly hated him for it. He wished Chiyan would lie, wished he would say anything else at all, rather than admit he'd had a hand in Xiahou Pei's death.

"Did you know the truth about our mother's death all along?"

"Yes," replied Chiyan.

Xiahou Lian turned and walked away. After a few steps, he stopped. "If the abbot asked you to, would you try to kill me?"

The mountain breeze lifted Chiyan's hair; his white sleeves fluttered. He sat on the cliff edge, the boundless night sky behind him, and looked at Xiahou Lian's back. His eyes filled with desolate loneliness.

"Yes," he said.

"Good," Xiahou Lian said. "That's good, because I'd kill you, too. Now neither of us needs to hold back."

Xiahou Lian and Qiu Ye descended the mountain together. Wind was still gusting; it filled their sleeves with cold air.

Holding his xun, Chiyan looked up at the brilliant, starry sky.

"But I would lose to you, Xiao-Lian," he murmured softly, but no one was there to hear.

Xiahou Lian returned to his bamboo hut. He hadn't been back for a while, and the small courtyard was overgrown with weeds. Some kind of insect was chirping, and grasshoppers jumped over his feet. Fallen leaves covered the stove beneath the shed; some had even fallen into the pot. A gray rabbit darted out from under the stove as Xiahou Lian walked past.

Xiahou Lian pulled out a bench, found an old cloth to wipe it clean, and had Qiu Ye sit down. Then he went inside to fetch two bottles of pear-blossom wine. Before placing them in front of Qiu Ye, however, he hesitated.

“Shifu, can you still drink?”

“Why not?” Qiu Ye smiled, biting off one bottle’s cork and taking a swig.

Xiahou Lian sipped the wine as well. The spicy liquid’s heat sliced into his throat like a blade, warming his body. He exhaled slowly. The night was deep blue, the mountain shrouded in mist. Red and purple clusters of verbena and hydrangeas blended together, resembling a watercolor painted on damp paper.

“You knew too, didn’t you, Shifu?” Xiahou Lian asked abruptly.

“Yes, I knew.”

“And so did my mother. Starting in the twenty-sixth year of Qianyuan, all her missions were during the rainy season. She couldn’t have missed that.”

“Yes. She knew.”

Xiahou Lian laughed joylessly. “The only one in the dark was me.”

“Don’t blame your mother,” Qiu Ye sighed. “Even without Shixin’s interference, she wouldn’t have lasted much longer. An assassin’s end doesn’t always come by the blade—sometimes the body gives out on its own. Hers was already riddled with wounds. She knew her time was coming, but… Well, you know how she was—uneducated, clumsy with words. She just didn’t know how to say goodbye.”

“What about your sores? Can’t they be treated?” asked Xiahou Lian.

Qiu Ye shook his head with a smile. “Xiao-Lian, aren’t there other questions you’d prefer to ask?”

Xiahou Lian was silent for a moment. “What happened back then?”

Qiu Ye lowered his head, his gaze growing distant, as if he was lost in far-off memories. “I don’t know much about it,” he began. “I’d just arrived at the Garden around that time. Half a year before I joined, there’d been a terrible internal conflict. The Garden suffered heavy casualties and lost most of its assassins. The former abbot selected children from the village to fill the ranks while also recruiting skilled outcasts from outside. I was one of them, but we outsiders weren’t welcome at first. And your mother… She was unruly, never liked following orders. People disliked her too. We bonded over our shared plight and became close confidants. Back then, the Garden’s Eight Legions were very different from what they are now. Each was an expert personally trained by the previous leader. At that time, Shixin was the Garuda.”

Xiahou Lian was stunned. “*He* was the twenty-seventh Garuda?”

“He was,” Qiu Ye said. “Your mother was eventually hailed as the world’s greatest swordswoman, but back then, the truly unrivaled one was Shixin. One step, one life. Ten steps—rivers of blood, bloody lotuses blooming beneath every step. Thus, his blade was called Bushenglian—‘A lotus for every step.’ Twenty-one years ago, when your mother was pregnant with you and your brother, the former abbot suddenly issued a decree. The Eight Legions marched north and did not return—three months passed, and no one knew what had happened in those frozen wastes. The night you were born, just after the village midwife finished wrapping you

and Chiyan in swaddling clothes, Shixin returned, drenched in blood. He scared the poor midwife half to death. Without a word, he took one child and turned to leave. Your mother dragged herself from bed to ask what he was doing. He told her he was taking a child with him—and severing all his ties with her."

"Some man he was, bullying a woman who'd just given birth!" Xiahou Lian sneered. "He should have just died on the northern border instead of coming back!"

"Actually, he and your mother weren't all that different back then. Shixin used to be very good-natured—otherwise, he would've never won over your mother. But that day, he was determined to take the child. Your mother said, 'The child stays. Now come here and prostrate yourself a hundred times.' Shixin asked whether he could prostrate himself a hundred times in exchange for the child. Your mother said, 'Do it first, and then we'll talk.'"

"Did he do it?"

"He did. He prostrated himself a full one hundred times. Your mother never thought he'd actually go through with it, and she still refused to let him take the child…so they fought. Both were already at their limit, yet neither would yield. In the end, they were just beating each other senseless with no technique whatsoever. But your mother collapsed first. As she lay there, Shixin said, 'I'm taking him. You'll never see this child again.'"

"The child he took was Chiyan," Xiahou Lian murmured.

"Exactly. Your mother lost. For the seventeen years that followed, she kept her promise and never went to see Chiyan. And no one but Shixin and his close friend Duan Jiu knows what truly happened during that brutal

assassination twenty-one years ago. But after that, Shixin became the Garden's abbot, and a new Eight Legions was selected. The Garden returned to normal."

"It sounds like he must've retreated when it mattered most. The former abbot and the other seven legions were slaughtered, so he blamed himself—and *this* was how he chose to atone. Ridiculous—it's ridiculous!" Xiahou Lian buried his face in his hands. "Tell me, Shifu… If I'd become stronger sooner, would he have spared my mother?"

"It's not your fault, Xiao-Lian. In truth, he should've chosen Chiyan—but for some reason, he changed his mind. Perhaps it's because Chiyan has no heart, and a heartless person could never lead Qiye Garden, no matter how strong they are." Qiu Ye turned to look at Xiahou Lian, his eyes in the moonlight as calm as water. "Xiao-Lian, do you want revenge?"

"Of course I do. I'll kill him. As for leadership of the Garden, whoever wants it can have it." Xiahou Lian stood, his eyes full of cold, ruthless determination. "Shixin, the Heart-Slayer. Ridiculous! He can pay his debts in hell!"

"Xiao-Lian, have you found your mother's will?" Qiu Ye asked suddenly.

Xiahou Lian started. "No. I searched everywhere, but I couldn't find it. She always left things lying around—the rats have probably gotten to it by now."

Qiu Ye ran his fingers over the raised pattern on the wine flask and spoke slowly. "Your mother left something for you out there…" He suddenly paused for a moment, then continued, "Xiao-Lian…do you want to leave the Garden?"

“What do you mean? My mother—”

“While she still was still alive, your mother once told me she wanted you to break the cycle, Xiao-Lian.” Qiu Ye walked to Xiahou Pei’s cenotaph and poured out the wine in his jug before it. “She was different from the rest of us—not just because of her peerless blade skills, but because she was born to be an assassin. Most of the Garden’s assassins were homeless beggars before they came here, but your mother sought the Garden out herself. She claimed she’d seized control of her own destiny, and she wanted the same for you—because *you* never belonged in the Garden.”

“She wanted me to run? Not avenge her, just run?” Xiahou Lian stared at the characters he’d carved into her tombstone himself: *Xiahou Pei’s Grave*. She’d never married, so no husband’s surname would ever precede her own given name. Why should death chain her to a man’s name, after all? She’d been decisive and independent her entire life. The stone belonged to Xiahou Pei alone, and that was enough.

“No.” When Qiu Ye raised his eyes, there was a glint of steel in them. “Xiao-Lian, you can destroy the Garden!”

“How could I do that?” Xiahou Lian was shocked. “If the Garden is destroyed, what would happen with the Seven Fifteen? You’d all die!”

“Not ‘you’—‘we.’” Qiu Ye’s voice was a whisper. “Do you truly understand what kind of place the Garden is, Xiao-Lian? Every year, the village takes in fifty children—mostly boys, sturdy-limbed and parentless, who treat the Garden like their home. Every year, twenty enter the mountain temple. The abbot gives them daggers and hangs plaques with their names…and within three days, half those plaques come down again. Those

are the children who died on their first kill. On top of that, at least seven seasoned assassins perish each year, and three bodies—if we're lucky—make it back to the Blade Cemetery. Year after year, bones pile mountain-high in that consecrated place. Just yesterday, I watched them dig another grave. Tell me, Xiao-Lian—should such a place continue to exist?"

"But—"

"Surely you saw the medicine cavern inside Heimianfo. Others believe I capture runaway assassins and deliver them to the abbot for execution. But they're wrong. The abbot moves them into Heimianfo, and they become test subjects for his drugs. I don't know what he's developing now—perhaps Eight Fifteen or Nine Fifteen—but I do know he's a sinner. Everyone in the Garden is a sinner! Blood stains every pair of hands, and our crimes hang heavy around our necks. We all deserve death—including Chiyan, myself, and you."

"You and Chiyan are different, Shifu. And Shu Qing, he—"

"There's *no* difference! We're all sinners. Can you deny it?" Qiu Ye chuckled softly. "Xiao-Lian, your mother wanted you to break free and seize control of your fate. The abbot wants you to succeed him as abbot and slay his enemy in the northern wastes. But what *I* want…is for you to destroy the Garden!"

Silence fell between them, heavy as death.

The mist thickened and enveloped Xiahou Lian. The air around him became stifling; he felt suffocated. His mind was in turmoil. He thought of Chiyan's desolate eyes, then of Shixin holding the candle. Finally, he saw Xiahou Pei's corpse lying on the ground, gazing at the distant sky. He looked down at his palm, marked with a scar from Liu Guicang's arrow.

“What should I do?” he asked.

Qiu Ye smiled, as gentle and warm as a spring breeze brushing past flowers. Then the smile vanished abruptly and his expression shifted, becoming as solemn as the statues of deities in the temple halls. “Kill Shixin. Burn the medicine cavern to ashes. Let Seven Fifteen carry us all into the embrace of death!”

Chapter 52:
A Hasty Grudge

AFTER A LECTURE FROM QIU YE, Shu Qing packed his belongings alongside Xiahou Lian in preparation for their journey to Suzhou. Shu Qing had received his first assignment of the year. This time, Qiu Ye had instructed him to carry out the kill himself, with Xiahou Lian merely assisting. After this, Shu Qing could no longer rely on his shige; he would have to handle jobs on his own.

Anxiety churned in Shu Qing's chest as they traveled. The road wove among trees, sunlight filtering through the leaves and casting flickering patterns on his hand as it gripped the horsewhip. It was as if flames licked the back of his hand. The cicadas in the forest chirped in waves as the wind whistled past his ears. Occasionally, a dark, buzzing insect flew straight at him, making him duck his head in fright.

As the sun set, they prepared to camp in the wilderness. Shu Qing lit a fire and roasted a rabbit while Xiahou Lian sat across from him, eyes closed in meditation. Staring at the round, glowing moon in the sky, Shu Qing thought of Liushao-er.

When they arrived at the inn in Suzhou, they saw a small river running parallel to the street. Pavilions and waterside gazebos with glazed tiles and red-lacquered doors lined its banks. The streets bustled with life. People packed the shops, the black characters on their crimson signs advertising goods like fine white noodles, wine vessels, gold and silver jewelry, and steel embroidery needles. Noise and excitement filled the air. Shirtless performers showed off tricks, and craftsmen in hemp clothes and

cloth shoes presented puppet shows. A few courtesans sang operatic tunes at a crossroads, their lilting voices carrying across half of the street.

The target was not a martial artist but a salt merchant. He lived on Renfeng Lane, just ten steps past the Hudan Bridge. His estate was enormous; it included a large garden featuring a pond that connected to the river outside. Around the pond were a winding walkway, a central pavilion, some artificial islands, and row upon row of lotus flowers.

Their client was the salt merchant's legal wife. The merchant had spent his life trading salt and chasing loose women. Rumor had it that he'd once had an affair with the favored concubine of another local salt merchant; the two were spotted flirting at a banquet hosted by the prefect of Suzhou.

In the merchant's old age, his lust hadn't waned, though his mind had grown muddled. Before, he'd married seven or eight concubines but never loosened his purse strings, giving his illegitimate children only what they were due. Recently, though, he'd brought a courtesan back from Nanjing and transferred five or six shops to her name in one go. His legal wife finally snapped; biting her lip in frustration, she hired an assassin through one of their shops, determined to send the old man to the afterlife.

That night, Xiahou Lian and Shu Qing scaled the wall and entered the garden. The night was dark, but the moon hung high, casting a misty, watery glow. It bathed the garden in moonlight, the flowers and trees blending into a soft, silvery haze. The lotus flowers on the pond were in full bloom, their deep-red petals exuding eerie beauty in the darkness. The old man and his newest wife were in the pavilion at the center of the pond; the water surrounding them on all sides created a secluded paradise. A white-

walled, green-tiled walkway twisted and turned over the pond, connecting the pavilion to land.

The household was asleep, and the garden was silent aside from rustling leaves and the occasional chirp of insects in the shadows. Listening closely, one could hear a woman's sweet laughter drift from the pavilion, carried by the wind and rippling across the water.

Shu Qing followed Xiahou Lian through the darkness, crouching low as they approached the pavilion's red-lacquered door. Smooth, gauzy window paper covered the windows; Xiahou Lian poked a hole in it, revealing the faint silhouettes of two figures seated closely together.

Xiahou Lian signaled to Shu Qing with his eyes, but Shu Qing shook his head vigorously. Xiahou Lian made a slashing motion with his hand. His expression was hidden beneath his mask, but his eyes gleamed with an assassin's cold ruthlessness. Qiu Ye had once told Shu Qing that Xiahou Lian used to be just like him, too afraid to carry out jobs on his own. For two years, he had merely tagged along, earning himself the nickname "Xiahou the Coward" in Qiye Garden.

Now, Xiahou Lian's strikes were swift and deadly—when Hengbo was drawn, it was guaranteed to spill blood and cut throats. Xiahou Lian was a far cry from the coward he'd once been.

Shu Qing shivered, taking several deep breaths and steeling himself. Finally, he pushed the door open just a crack and slipped inside. Xiahou Lian followed close behind; their movements were as silent as those of ghosts.

The old man, having eaten and drunk his fill, pressed the woman facedown onto the table. He pulled a small box from his sleeve, extracted a

pill, and swallowed it. The woman's back was to them. Shu Qing watched the old man's bloated belly press against her smooth, bare skin and flatten like a lump of dough.

Xiahou Lian gestured to his own neck then pointed at the old man.

Shu Qing activated the mechanism on his flute, silently releasing the blade hidden within, and crept up behind the old man. The pair on the table were entangled, hair mingling as their bodies moved violently. The woman's high-pitched, melodic cries filled Shu Qing's ears, the sound oddly familiar. Shu Qing hesitated, his blade hovering in midair.

Behind him, Xiahou Lian shook his head and drew Hengbo, ready to step in. Then Shu Qing shook his own head, as if to clear his thoughts, and hardened himself. With a decisive swing, he brought his blade down. The knife sliced through the air in a deadly arc, decapitating the old man. His head rolled off the table as blood sprayed over the woman's face and body.

Liushao-er had been moaning as loudly as she could. The old man's strength was nowhere near Shu Qing's; his prowess in bed was unimpressive at best. Still, she'd forced herself to cry out loudly and sweetly, drawing on her operatic training to make her tone powerful and captivating. Her efforts delighted the old man.

As she continued her act, a warm, sticky liquid suddenly splashed across her neck. She assumed the old man had vomited something foul, but when she opened her eyes, she saw that she was covered in blood. The old man was still slumped over her. Horrified, she turned her head and saw his cleanly severed neck, blood gushing from the wound like a fountain.

"Ahhh!" Liushao-er screamed. She tried to push the headless corpse off her, but his grip was too tight, and he didn't budge. She twisted her

body, but his gushing blood continued to soak her, his neck stump pressing on her chest.

“Liushao-er!” a familiar voice called out, making her shiver.

Liushao-er looked up to see Shu Qing standing there, a bloodstained blade in one hand and a plain porcelain mask in the other. He stared back at her in shock. Another man dressed in black stood just outside the beaded curtain. She recognized him immediately—it was Xiahou Lian. Instantly, she understood everything.

“You’re assassins! You’re assassins!” Liushao-er shrieked, trying to pry the old man’s hands from her body. Losing her balance, she fell to the ground with the corpse and began to smear a long trail of blood across the floor. “Help! Somebody help! Murder! Murder!”

Shu Qing dropped his mask and stepped forward to help her. “Liushao-er, stop shouting! I’ve come to take you away!”

Terrified, Liushao-er scrambled backward; she dragged the corpse with her, leaving another long, bloody streak across the floor. “Stay away!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Assassins! Murderers! Help me! Someone help!”

Footsteps and torchlight approached from outside. “Forget her! Let’s go!” Xiahou Lian urged, grabbing Shu Qing and pulling him away.

“Liushao-er!” Shu Qing called, still looking back at her as Xiahou Lian dragged him off.

The naked woman entangled with the corpse was swept further and further behind them. In the pitch-black night, gusts of wind rushed into Shu Qing’s sleeves like fluttering pigeons, making the fabric billow and flap. Sharp blades of grass at the foot of the artificial hill stabbed out in all

directions like tiny knives, and vines hung from the trees like limp snakes swaying in the breeze.

Xiahou Lian held Shu Qing tightly and didn't let go. Their sheaths arrived to receive them, while undercover agents intercepted the pursuers and covered the assassins' retreat. Slipping down winding alleys, they returned to the inn through the back door.

Shu Qing crouched silently in a corner, his head buried in his arms. The warm summer night breeze blew gently through the window, the moonlight spilling in like water, but all he felt was bone-chilling cold.

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XIAHOU LIAN SENT A LETTER to Wanxiang Tower to ask what had happened. Liu Xiangnu replied, explaining that the old salt merchant had visited Wanxiang Tower a month earlier to watch a performance. He'd taken an immediate liking to Liushao-er, who decided to leave with him. No one could stop her. They'd planned to explain everything to Shu Qing on his return, but fate had brought him to Suzhou instead.

Tang Shiqi came to offer Shu Qing sympathies but only added fuel to the fire, saying he'd always known that Liushao-er wasn't the type to settle down. He insisted that a man should marry a proper woman from a respectable family. Xiahou Lian chased him away, leaving Shu Qing alone.

Shu Qing sat in the courtyard day after day, staring blankly. He looked up at the second-floor windows with their intricate lattice patterns; they opened and closed in the wind like the pages of a dense book. He

remembered Liushao-er sitting behind a similar window at Wanxiang Tower, combing her hair carefully and twisting it into a bun. When she lowered her gaze, she looked as gentle as a moonlit spring river. He recalled her round arms, her lotus-like wrists adorned with jade bracelets and peeking out of her pale sleeves. When she tucked his hair behind his ear, the faint scent of azaleas wafted from within her sleeve.

"What would you do in my shoes, Shige?" Shu Qing asked Xiahou Lian one evening.

That caught Xiahou Lian off guard. He'd never even considered marriage let alone the idea of being betrayed.

"How could she do this to me?" Shu Qing asked in anguish. "I had everything planned out for us—how many children we'd have, what their names would be. I thought we'd grow old together in the Garden village and be buried side by side in the Blade Cemetery when we died. I never imagined she'd betray me."

Xiahou Lian's lips moved as if to speak. He wanted to tell Shu Qing that assassins never lived to grow old, let alone died peacefully. But he held his tongue. Having dreams was better than having none; hope was better than despair. He didn't want to shatter Shu Qing's illusions.

Shu Qing wiped his eyes, his hands wet with tears.

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AFTER THREE OR FOUR DAYS of silence on Shu Qing's part, Tang Shiqi rushed over again. Not wanting to deal with him, Shu Qing rose and

began to leave.

“Liushao-er was arrested!” Tang Shiqi shouted.

Shu Qing halted.

Xiahou Lian stepped out from behind a screen. “What happened?” he asked. “Don’t ham it up—speak plainly.”

Tang Shiqi caught his breath. “That old man’s wife is ruthless. She bribed the county magistrate to charge Liushao-er with murder and theft. She’s been thrown in jail! There’s not enough evidence for a conviction just yet, so she’s only in custody for now. But all the shops the old man signed over to Liushao-er are being returned to his legal wife.”

Xiahou Lian and Tang Shiqi looked at Shu Qing, awaiting his decision, but Shu Qing only sat silently on a small stool, burying his head in his hands.

“If you ask me, you should leave her there,” Tang Shiqi said. “Let her learn her lesson. Maybe next time, she’ll think twice before betraying a man!”

“Shut up!” shouted Shu Qing, his eyes red. Tang Shiqi fell silent. Shu Qing turned to Xiahou Lian. “Shige, will you help me one more time? Let’s go save her.”

Xiahou Lian strapped Hengbo to his waist. “Let’s go.” He nodded at Tang Shiqi. “You’re coming too. You can keep watch for us.”

Tang Shiqi used his Jinghong arrows to deal with the two guards stationed at the prison gates while Xiahou Lian and Shu Qing charged in and took down the remaining guards. These guards were more accustomed to gambling and drinking than actual combat; they stood no chance against

Xiahou Lian, who had emerged victorious from countless battles, hardened by blood and steel. They could only submit.

The prison consisted of a single corridor stretching into oppressive darkness, cells lining either side. The damp straw floor of each cell served as the prisoner's bed. The cold stone bricks underfoot were damp, the walls grimy, some stained with what looked like old blood. Slippery moss riddled the cracks in the stone, and strange little insects crawled back and forth, leaving slimy trails.

They could hear Liushao-er singing opera in one cell. Her voice rose and fell in a hoarse, plaintive melody, sounding as though it had been ground down by sand, its roughness tinged with sorrow. Shu Qing stopped in his tracks in a corner, afraid to move forward, and wept silently.

Xiahou Lian waited by his side, but he grew impatient when Shu Qing remained motionless. Eventually, Liushao-er stopped singing, and faint rustling could be heard from her cell. Frustrated, Xiahou Lian kicked a wooden post and raked a hand through his hair.

"Stop dithering like a woman!" he ordered Shu Qing. "If you won't go, I will!"

Shu Qing jolted as if waking from a dream. He looked up, then walked to Liushao-er's cell and unlocked the door with a key he'd taken from a guard.

Liushao-er sat on the floor, her hair unkempt and filthy. She wore a soiled prisoner's uniform, a blanket draped over her knees. In just a few days, she had gone from a radiant, celebrated courtesan of Jinling to a wretched, exhausted prisoner. When she saw Shu Qing, there was no joy in her expression. Her dull, bloodshot eyes bored into him unsettlingly. The

corners of her pale, cracked lips curled into a faint, stiff smile that resembled a twisted red line.

Seeing that, Shu Qing felt as though she'd dumped a bucket of ice water over his head. A chill spread from his heart to his fingertips. Liushao-er no longer looked human; she looked like a ghost.

"You're here, Shu-lang!" She grinned wide, teeth gleaming like a wolf's.

"I've come to take you away," Shu Qing said, frowning. "Get up."

"Take me away? How?" Liushao-er laughed bitterly. She lifted the blanket off her knees, and Shu Qing froze. She wasn't wearing anything below the waist. Bruises and wounds covered her pale legs, and farther up, there was nothing but filth and blood.

Standing to the side, Xiahou Lian averted his eyes, his brow deeply furrowed.

Shu Qing's eyes turned red. "Liushao-er…"

"Why are you here?" Liushao-er asked, trembling as she leaned against the wall to stand. "Why did you come? I almost had everything—a few shops in prime locations. A bookstore, two taverns, a pastry shop. It was perfect. Once the old man finally stopped breathing, I was going to live on my own. With that money, I could've done anything! But you came along and ruined everything! So many women in this world chase wealth and status—why did you have to ruin *me*?!"

"I-I don't know…" Shu Qing reached out to her.

She dodged his hand. "Are you happy now?!" she shrieked. "I got thrown in prison, and those animals took turns with me! Guess how many of them forced themselves on me last night? Let me total them up—oh, I've

lost count! Why am I so stupid? You—you murderer! You fugitive! You're a beast, just like they are! You want to make me just like you—something that can only live in darkness and shame!"

Both Xiahou Lian and Shu Qing shuddered.

"Just knock her out so we can take her with us!" Xiahou Lian shouted at Shu Qing.

Liushao-er turned her glare to Xiahou Lian. "And *you*! You're just as much of a beast! It's all clear now! I know—you and Wanxiang Tower are both in on it! Madam Liu wanted to hand me over to you, to have me bear children for you—you murderer! You're all beasts!"

Suddenly, Liushao-er lunged at Xiahou Lian. He quickly stepped back, gripping Hengbo's hilt in his right hand.

"No!" Shu Qing shouted.

Liushao-er missed her target, brushing Xiahou Lian's sleeve as she slammed into the cell wall. She slid to the ground, face down, and Shu Qing heard a sickening thud. Dark red blood oozed from beneath Liushao-er, first in a single rivulet, then a second, until many streams converged into a pool that slowly expanded in a circle.

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XIAHOU LIAN STAYED in Suzhou with Shu Qing for a month to handle Liushao-er's burial. Shu Qing laid her to rest behind Hanshan Temple and donated a memorial tablet in her name, hoping she might be reborn into a better life.

Shu Qing also joined the monks in the main hall to recite prayers for the dead. Xiahou Lian and Tang Shiqi waited underneath the eaves, leaning on their elbows as the wind made the ornamental bells on the corners of the roof tinkle. The pungent smell of incense filled the air, making Tang Shiqi sneeze repeatedly. The monks' chanting echoed like distant drums, slow and resonant, stretching endlessly.

"Hey, Shiqi, do you really think there's a paradise somewhere in this world?" Xiahou Lian asked.

"Not in this world. There must be one beyond it, though," Tang Shiqi replied with a grin.

Xiahou Lian gazed at the sky for a while. "If I die, remember to burn some paper money for me."

Tang Shiqi slapped Xiahou Lian's shoulder. "Of course I will! I'll burn you enough for a mansion that would fit three families, four concubines, and seven or eight servants. You'll be satisfied for sure!"

Just then, a servant from the inn hurried up the stairs. Xiahou Lian stood and gestured for him to speak.

Gasping for breath, the servant said, "Master Xiahou, you must take Master Shu back to the mountain quickly. News has come from the temple —Master Qiu's health is failing!"

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LEAVES FELL FROM the old pagoda tree and spiraled gently to the ground, one landing on Xiahou Lian's shoulder. Soft, dim light filtered

through the thick canopy, scattering faint specks of brightness around him. The withered rose vines that climbed the bamboo fence were brittle, petals gray and stiff as paper. The autumn wind stirred relentlessly in the courtyard. Even Qiu Ye's small chicks huddled together in their coop, chirping softly with their wings tucked in.

With his soulful eyes and naturally red lips, Qiu Ye had always been the most striking man in the Garden. His words were eternally gentle, flowing soft and smooth as the rippling waves of Dongting Lake; even his anger only caused a few fleeting ripples. Since childhood, Xiahou Lian had loved trailing after him, whether to visit the Garden village for rice and oil, cut bamboo in the woods, or play with the chicks in their coop. Qiu Ye had taught everything he knew to Xiahou Lian—cooking, sewing, disguise, and mimicry—with ever-patient hands.

But all leaves[21] eventually fell from their trees, and Xiahou Lian could no longer chase after Qiu Ye, calling him "Dage" or "Shifu."

Wiping his eyes, Shu Qing walked out of the house. "Shige, Master is calling for you."

Xiahou Lian rose to his feet and pushed open the creaking wooden door. Inside, Qiu Ye lay on a kang bed wrapped in a quilt of faded floral silk. His emaciated frame sank into the covers, one hand resting on the edge of the bed, its delicate bones jutting sharply under a thin layer of skin.

Qiu Ye extended that frail hand toward Xiahou Lian, a faint smile tugging his lips.

"The time has come to say goodbye, Xiao-Lian," Qiu Ye said softly, his voice barely more than a sigh.

"I'll stay with you," Xiahou Lian whispered.

Retrieving a small wooden box from the head of the bed, Qiu Ye placed it in Xiahou Lian's hands. "Inside this are my twelve Qiushui cicada-wing blades. Four are for you, and the remaining eight are for your shidi."

Qiu Ye opened the box to reveal the blades. Neatly arranged and gleaming faintly, each was as long as a finger and so thin that it resembled a cicada wing. The blades' surfaces shimmered with a delicate, flowing pattern resembling rippling water. Xiahou Lian picked one up; its pattern and texture were intensely familiar.

"What are these blades made of, Shifu?" asked Xiahou Lian.

"Tian Shan meteoric iron," Qiu Ye replied. "The first head of the Qiu family collected it himself from the Tian Shan mountains. You must take care of these blades. You needn't pass them on, but don't treat them carelessly."

Xiahou Lian closed the box carefully and nodded, his expression solemn.

"There's one more thing," Qiu Ye continued, gazing deeply at him. "I have an elder brother named Qiu Shan. He lives in seclusion at the foot of Qixia Mountain. He knows the true art of disguise—the ability to reshape bone and flesh and remake faces. If the day ever comes when you leave Garden, consider seeking him out."

"I understand," Xiahou Lian replied.

Qiu Ye smiled faintly and closed his eyes. Outside, the wind rose, rustling the dense leaves of the pagoda trees. Through the latticed window, Xiahou Lian watched swaying branch tips, upon which hung a deep-red sun. In the distance, the mountain temple’s bells tolled slowly in a deliberate, lingering rhythm, each strike resonating.

Xiahou Lian tucked Qiu Ye’s hand beneath the quilt. “Farewell, Shifu.”

Chapter 53:
The Pull of a Thousand Mechanisms

THE TREES WERE BARE, their thin, leafless branches stretching overhead like cracks across the pale-blue sky, resembling intricate fissures on blue-and-white porcelain. The snow recently cleared from the mountain gate's stone steps was piled to either side in neat mounds that looked like tiny hills. In the main hall, Tang Shiqi sat cross-legged on a meditation mat, rubbing his bright-red, frostbitten hands. Looking out through the doorway, he saw the rambling, desolate mountains blanketed in white. In the distance, an assassin's hut poked out of the snow, its roof a dull yellowish brown. Long stone steps cascaded downward from the hut before vanishing into the thick, misty falling snow below.[22]

A handful of assassins trickled into the hall one by one. They were bundled in cloaks, their faces covered. Each retrieved a pill from a black-lacquered alms bowl atop the altar before huddling near the charcoal stove for warmth. Tang Shiqi overheard one mutter a curse under his breath. "When will they finally fix this place? What a dump!" Tang Shiqi raised his gaze to the ceiling, where a gaping hole let wind and snow swirl in to land on the assassins' dark heads.

Qiye Garden was a strange place. From the moment Tang Shiqi arrived, he'd felt a bone-deep chill that made him shiver uncontrollably. The Buddha statues here were all painted black; their once-compassionate, once-serene faces had taken on an inexplicable ferocity under the lacquer. Most of the statues were ancient, their paint peeling. Their aged, mottled faces seemed to sag slightly, their half-closed eyes casting indifferent gazes

over the assassins gathered below. Tang Shiqi again felt a cold chill slice down his neck, as though a blade had just grazed him.

The abbot was seated beneath the Buddha of Light. He flipped open an old scripture and began to chant. Most of the assassins slouched, some leaning against pillars and nodding off. The abbot's flat, monotonous voice was like a lifeless melody. On the far side of the hall, snoring began—first a long snore, then a series of shorter ones, rhythmic and varied like an erhu. Paired with the abbot's droning chant, it really was almost musical.

Tang Shiqi felt an irrepressible urge to laugh. Bored, he glanced around the hall and noticed Chiyan sitting beneath the Manjushri Bodhisattva statue. He considered going over to chat, but he remembered that—since he was here to impersonate Xiahou Lian—he couldn't risk giving himself away. With some effort, he restrained himself.

Xiahou Lian had now set off for the Tian Shan mountains. After burying Qiu Ye, Shu Qing had headed west, while Xiahou Lian had sought out Tang Shiqi, still carrying the cicada-wing blades. He'd shown Tang Shiqi the blades' rippling cloud patterns, which perfectly matched notes in Tang Lan's journals. Xiahou Lian had handed Tang Shiqi a mask that resembled human flesh and taught him to mimic voices so that Tang Shiqi could impersonate him in the Garden while Xiahou Lian headed to the mountains. The pill Xiahou Lian carried, originally intended for his mother, had now been repurposed. It would extend his life another year, buying him time to track down the meteoric iron.

While impersonating Xiahou Lian, Tang Shiqi had free rein over his savings. Xiahou Lian was extraordinarily wealthy, having earned substantial sums through years of successful assassinations. Furthermore, he had no vices—he didn't gamble, frequent brothels, or indulge in

theatergoing. At worst, he splurged on an occasional jug of wine and let himself collect a few blades, which yielded considerable savings.

That delighted Tang Shiqi. Disguised as Xiahou Lian, he indulged in a life of luxury. He spent hundreds of silver taels sponsoring a star in Jiangling, showering her with red silk, gold hairpins, and jade combs every time she appeared on stage. He was the “first patron” of two young courtesans in Hangzhou and spent two days at Yanchun House. The Eastern Depot quickly caught his scent, though, so he bribed the eunuchs with dozens of taels and made a hasty escape, leaving behind his gold sash clasp and jade-ornamented fan tassel. It was said that one young woman had kept her chastity for him to the present day. When a courtesan lost her virginity along Qinhuai River, it was often to the sight of “Xiahou Lian” throwing gold leaves from a boat. When a Yangzhou Companion wed, she received a convoy filled with a lavish dowry, supposedly sent by Xiahou Lian.

Thus, in addition to his infamy as the Wuminggui, Xiahou Lian gained another nickname: the Libertine of Wu Gate. Courtesans across the land were proud to have him visit their chambers. Meanwhile, Eastern Depot officers combed through brothels and singing halls as every courtesan claimed that Xiahou Lian was in her room. Yet despite the depot’s relentless efforts, they never so much as glimpsed Xiahou Lian’s shadow, and Tang Shiqi would watch from the sidelines, chuckling in amusement.

But Tang Shiqi was troubled as well. Xiahou Lian had enemies everywhere, the Eastern Depot the most formidable of all. It wasn’t clear why they nursed a grudge against Xiahou Lian, but his wanted posters were plastered all over every street, and the Eastern Depot agents patrolled daily, hands on their sabers as they scrutinized the passersby. Xiahou Lian was safely in the Tian Shan mountains, a remote, desolate corner untouched by

Eastern Depot agents, but Tang Shiqi had to evade them constantly while simultaneously maintaining his cover in Qiye Garden. It left him utterly exhausted.

More often than not, just as he was about to embrace a girl, Depot officers stormed in. He had to plant a fleeting kiss on her lips, leap out the window under her longing gaze, and escape, promising to return someday.

In the hall, the pattern of the assassin's snores changed—now three long snores were followed by one short. The abbot paused mid-chant, glancing faintly in the direction of the noise. Someone nudged the sleeping assassin with an elbow until he groggily opened his eyes. The abbot closed the scripture in his hands and stood. Tang Shiqi's gaze followed his movements to the western wall, where thirty or more neatly arranged wooden plaques hung, each bearing the name not of a person but a blade.

The topmost plaques belonged to the Eight Legions of Qiye Garden; only those plaques displayed the assassins' titles, inscribed in ink. The space beneath the *Garuda* plaque was empty. The *Hengbo* plaque, Tang Shiqi noticed, hung in an unremarkable spot in the very bottom row.

The abbot walked to the wall, removed several plaques, then pulled several new ones from his sleeve to replace them. Finally, he moved the *Hengbo* plaque, hanging it below the one that read *Garuda*.

"Xiahou Lian," the abbot said.

Tang Shiqi jolted. All the assassins turned to look at him—dozens of cold, unfamiliar gazes. Tang Shiqi suddenly felt like a living man trespassing in a crowd of ghosts. He forced himself to respond, his voice steady despite the dread prickling his skin.

"Here!"

The abbot approached him and placed his hand atop Tang Shiqi's head. "From this moment on, you are the twenty-ninth Garuda."

Tang Shiqi lowered his head, his heart pounding like a drum. It felt as though five iron fingers clamped his skull—icy, stiff, devoid of warmth. Perhaps it was the bitter cold or the dilapidation of the temple, but the frigid air seemed to seep chillingly into his bones. Resting on Tang Shiqi's head, the abbot's frail, skeletal hand gave off the same eerie sensation a corpse's would have.

What was Tang Shiqi supposed to do now? Cry tears of gratitude? Bow and offer thanks? He silently cursed Xiahou Lian for failing to prepare him for such an event—when an assassin received such a title, what was the protocol?

Before Tang Shiqi could untangle his thoughts, the abbot removed his hand. Gesturing, he called two assassins to move a charcoal brazier to the center of the hall. The abbot sat cross-legged in front of the brazier and began placing the plaques he'd removed into the flames, one by one.

"We assassins have no names, no titles, no masters, no fathers, no homes, and no nations. We wield the Bodhi Saber, the Blade of Life and Death, to kill the righteous, sinful, mundane, noble, and powerful alike. Darkness is our brother, the eternal night our kin. We are the shadows beneath the light, the ghosts in the night, the moths drawn toward flames. We walk the path of sin, ending grudges and taking revenge. By entering this gate of liberation, we earn an immortal existence. May your departed spirits ascend to the pure land of paradise and join us in eternity."

As the plaques in the brazier blackened and burned, the assassins quietly echoed the abbot's words: "Ascend to paradise. Join us in eternity."

The solemn chant reverberated like heavy bells in Tang Shiqi's ears, leaving him dazed and disoriented. Lost in a haze, he followed the crowd out of the hall. Assassins filed past him through the swirling shadows, their faces expressionless, gazes fixed straight ahead.

As Tang Shiqi recalled the abbot's words earlier, he felt his heart sink as though it was encased in ice. Unable to resist, he glanced back and saw Chiyan standing beneath the eaves of the walkway, watching him silently. Chiyan's gaze was calm and distant like falling winter snow. Snapping out of his daze, Tang Shiqi fled hastily for fear that his deception would be exposed.

Xiahou Lian's house was so rundown that it resembled an ancient ruin abandoned for centuries. When Tang Shiqi moved in, he'd cursed Xiahou Lian's negligence, but almost immediately, he'd realized the dilapidation suited him; after all, a ghost who'd crawled out of hell belonged in a forbidding hovel. Fortunately, Xiahou Lian had told Tang Shiqi where to find a few jars of pear-blossom wine he'd buried behind the house. With some huffing and puffing, Tang Shiqi dug them out and drank himself into a stupor.

Later, Uncle Duan passed by and spotted Tang Shiqi sprawled in the snow. "Xiao-Lian, what're you doing lying there?" he called out in concern, pushing open the bamboo fence. "It's freezing! Get inside before you catch a cold!"

Tang Shiqi squinted at the burly man's broad face. "Who're you, pancake-face? Get lost!" he slurred. "You're ruining my drinking!"

"You brat!" Uncle Duan barked, red with anger. Shaking his head at Tang Shiqi's drunken state, he added, "I've heard all about your antics.

Here in the Garden, we always keep a low profile—but everywhere else, you swagger around! Keep it up and you'll invite disaster. What's wrong with you? Is there no proper work you can do now that you've avenged your mother?"

"Oh, I do important work, all right," Tang Shiqi replied cheerfully. "Down by Qinhuai River, and in all the Hualiu Alley brothels, the ladies are lined up waiting for me!"

"You! You—!" His face flushed, Uncle Duan stormed off in fury.

After lounging in the snow a while longer, Tang Shiqi felt the chill seeping into his bones. He rolled over and crawled back indoors.

That night, the moon hung bright and cold behind the mountains, casting pale light over the quiet, desolate sky. Darkness shrouded the undulating peaks, and lamps glowed faintly from the scattered assassins' huts like solitary fireflies about to be swallowed by the night. In the meditation room, the abbot lit an old oil lamp. At the edge of the lamp tray, its single flame trembled, casting flickering shadows that danced across the walls.

Uncle Duan made his way down the flower path; it was barren now, and the snow weighed down only on tangled, dried branches that scraped his ankles painfully as he walked. Entering the meditation room, he sat down by the lamp to inspect his feet, grumbling, "Shixin, when are you going to fix up this decrepit old temple?"

Shixin sighed. "Next year," he replied. "Let's wait until next year."

"You said that last year too."

"There's no money, Duan Jiu." Shixin adjusted the lamp wick.

Duan Jiu pursed his lips, but he knew exactly where the Garden's bounty money had gone, so he said no more. Chiyan leaned against the lattice window, staring blankly at the snowflakes drifting outside.

"I don't think that brat Xiahou Lian is going to make it," Uncle Duan said.

Shixin paused as he trimmed the lamp's wick.

"Have you heard about his antics?" Uncle Duan sighed. "Ever since he avenged his mother, he's been slacking off. He spends his days chasing women; he has no sense of responsibility. How could he possibly take over your position? The blade you forged has gone dull, Shixin."

"I've heard," Shixin said, his brow furrowed. "He used to avoid women entirely. Even when serving Yuenü, and when he dealt with Liushao-er recently, he showed no interest."

"I've heard he's hanging around some guy named Tang Shiqi—a real scoundrel. The bastard must've led Xiahou Lian astray."

"Perhaps we should kill Tang Shiqi," Shixin suggested, tucking in his sleeves as he sat on the meditation mat. Turning to Chiyan, he asked, "What do you think, Chiyan?"

Chiyan withdrew his gaze from the snow and placed his hands neatly on his knees. He raised his eyes, his faintly melancholic gaze fixed on the flickering lamp flame. "Xiahou Lian has strayed onto a dark path. His mind is corrupt and beyond redemption."

"In that case, Chiyan, you're the only one who can take on the northern frontier," Shixin said. "My plan isn't foolproof. Our predecessors perished in the ice and snow, and after that the people there became

cautious—only the Garden abbot can meet them. But they'll never accept your heartlessness, Chiyan."

Chiyan lowered his head, catching a snowflake as it drifted through a tear in the window screen. It melted instantly in his palm. "There will be a way," he said. "You once said that certain things must be faced even if they lead to a mountain of blades or an ocean of fire."

"You're right," said Shixin. "Who else remembers what happened twenty-one years ago? I alone can recall how they were beheaded, their blood mingling with the snow. I alone remember their faces, their voices, who they were. So I alone can avenge them. Go, child. I'll devise a plan to ensure that you reach the northern frontier safely and meet those people. Whatever happens next is up to you."

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TANG SHIQI WAS FEVERISH, his head pounding. As he climbed from his bed to fetch water, the sound of crunching footsteps outside caught his attention. Someone entered, carrying wind and snow in with them. As faint light filtered through the window screen, illuminating the figure, Tang Shiqi squinted. He managed to recognize the figure's outline—it was Chiyan.

Chiyan sat on the bed and handed Tang Shiqi a letter. "This is my will. Please deliver it to Xiahou Lian."

Tang Shiqi's head throbbed as he placed the letter on the bedside table. "What nonsense are you spouting now? *I* am Xiahou Lian!"

“No, you’re not—I can tell,” Chiyan said. “I’m going to the northern frontier. I may not return. Uncle Duan said assassins usually leave behind wills to settle their affairs and distribute their belongings. I don’t have much to leave behind, though—just some words for Xiahou Lian.”

To Tang Shiqi, Chiyan’s words had sounded muffled, as though they came from a distance. “Then why not just tell him directly? What’s the point of writing a letter…?” Tang Shiqi mumbled, his head spinning.

Chiyan remained silent, and although the sadness in his eyes was unmistakable, Tang Shiqi couldn’t see it in the darkness.

After a moment, Chiyan replied, “I used to dislike going down the mountain. The lights, the flowers, the noisy people below—I thought they had nothing to do with me. I believed I was like the wind, leaving no trace wherever I went, disappearing in an instant. But then Xiahou Lian came along, and I realized that there was someone else in this world who looked exactly like me. We are brothers, bound by blood. He is my connection to the world.” He glanced at Tang Shiqi. “Does that make sense? I’ve spent so much time alone that I don’t know how to talk to others.”

Tang Shiqi nodded vaguely.

“I’ve heard about the Bridge of Helplessness,”[23] Chiyan continued. “If you cross it without drinking Meng Po’s soup,[24] you won’t forget your past life. I’ll try not to drink it. Could you ask Xiahou Lian for me whether he’s willing to keep being my brother in the next life, if I find him?”

Tang Shiqi sat up abruptly. “All right, all right, I get it! My head’s spinning, and I feel like I’m going to throw up. Can you hurry up and go?”

Startled, Chiyan stood. He hesitated for a moment before responding, “Sorry. I’ll leave now.”

Tang Shiqi lay back down as Chiyan quietly left the room.

The next day, Tang Shiqi woke with a lingering headache. He opened the window to see snow falling heavily, blanketing the mountains in endless white. Turning back to the empty interior, he vaguely remembered Chiyan's visit the night before, but it seemed like a dream—why would Chiyan have been there in the middle of the night? Tang Shiqi knocked on his own head, blaming his grogginess, and failed to notice the corner of a letter peeking from beneath his pillow.

Winter passed, and Tang Shiqi finally left the Garden to return to the comforts of the world below. When he arrived at Yanchun House, he was overwhelmed with emotion; it felt like a homecoming. The familiar scent of heavy perfume filled the air, sweet to the point of being cloying. Straight rows of red octagonal lanterns hung under the eaves. Gauzy silk robes fluttered as women moved, their faces glowing faintly red under the lantern light. The courtyard was alive with noise—the women's shrill giggles, the splash of a drunken guest stumbling into the pond and the subsequent chorus of laughter.

"That damned eunuch Wei De and his godson Shen Jue—they're the worst!" someone at a nearby table exclaimed.

Tang Shiqi was holding a slender woman around the waist. They fed each other wine as he eavesdropped on the nearby table's chatter.

"Master Xiahou, why did you wait so long to visit?" the woman murmured softly, leaning into his arms with a hint of resentment.

"Ah—I'm so sorry, my lovely sweetheart. I got caught up in some trouble and couldn't get away," Tang Shiqi replied with a laugh.

The conversation at the other table grew more animated.

“Yes—the worst!” someone agreed. “Did you know about that case ten years back when the entire Xie family got wiped out?”

“Who doesn’t?” another voice replied. “Lord Xie Bingfeng was a pillar of integrity and a cornerstone of the court! But he was a thorn in Wei De’s side, so the old scoundrel hired assassins to kill the whole household. Despite his age, poor old Master Dai spent years running around to gather evidence before finally proving that Wei De was the mastermind!”

“How long are you staying this time, Master Xiahou?” the woman asked, poking Tang Shiqi’s chest playfully.

“No idea. Depends when the Eastern Depot shows up!” Tang Shiqi laughed heartily.

The men at the other table continued their indignant discussion. “It’s a shame the emperor is so foolish. He protects Wei De no matter what! Master Dai spent days submitting grievances and exposing Wei De’s crimes, but the emperor just ignored him!”

“I heard that Wei De even sent Shen Jue to attack Master Dai! Luckily, some righteous hero intervened, and Dai-xiansheng escaped unharmed!”

“Don’t worry. Dai-xiansheng has made it clear that if anything happens to him, it’s Wei De’s doing! Wei De doesn’t dare make a move now. He even sent guards to protect Master Dai. I guess he’s afraid the blame will fall on him if the elderly man falls ill and dies.”

“You two gentlemen seem to be enjoying yourselves,” a cold voice interrupted. A dark-faced man approached the table and glared at the men icily.

The two men, clearly drunk, stood and shoved him. “Hey, what’s your problem? What do you want?”

“Are you discussing state affairs? Perhaps you’d like to continue this conversation at the Eastern Depot,” the dark-faced man said. He gestured, and suddenly several black-robed Eastern Depot officers stepped from the shadows.

The two men turned pale, sobering instantly. They fell to their knees and begged for mercy. Tang Shiqi, watching the commotion, began to back away slowly, inching toward the door.

The dark-faced man turned, his eyes landing on Tang Shiqi. Then his expression hardened. “Xiahou Lian!” he shouted. “Seize him!”

Tang Shiqi groaned inwardly, cursing himself for leaving the human mask on. He bolted down the street. Spotting someone leading a horse, he grabbed the reins, mounted, and galloped toward Yuelun Peak. The Eastern Depot agents pursued him relentlessly; their billowing robes made them look like a flock of predatory black hawks.

Pedestrians scattered in panic as the chase tore through the streets. The wind cut like knives against Tang Shiqi’s ears, and the thunder of hooves echoed behind him. He fired his Jinghong crossbow at his pursuers and took down several officers, but more Eastern Depot agents quickly took their places, and Tang Shiqi cursed under his breath.

The road ahead ended abruptly in a cliff, and Tang Shiqi reined in his horse. The dark-faced officer smirked, seeing that there was no escape. But before he could celebrate, Tang Shiqi dismounted and sprinted toward the cliff edge as if preparing to leap.

The officer gave chase, but Tang Shiqi was too fast. He dove into the void like a bird, the wind whipping through his clothes. Everyone watched in stunned silence, expecting him to plummet to his death. Instead, two three-foot iron frames covered in black oilcloth unfolded from his back; they looked like bat wings. Tang Shiqi caught the wind and glided toward the Qiantang River below as onlookers cheered from the Liuhe Pagoda.

“Bring me a bow!” the dark-faced officer roared.

“Sir, the depot chief ordered him captured alive and unharmed!” another officer protested.

“Better dead than escaped!” the man snapped, drawing the bow himself. He aimed at the shrinking figure of Tang Shiqi, taut bowstring curving like the edge of a full moon. Taking a deep breath, the officer released the arrow; it flew with a sonorous whistle toward its target.

“Did it hit?” an officer asked, shielding his eyes to look.

The shadow in the sky shuddered but didn’t fall. It glided into the dense forest on the opposite bank.

Tang Shiqi had been struck in the shoulder. If the arrow had hit slightly lower, it would’ve destroyed the mechanical wings and pierced his heart. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Tang Shiqi stumbled back to Xiahou Lian’s secret lair and shut himself in.

The Garden sent word later that someone had left Jingtie in the capital’s bell tower. Tang Shiqi, who had no idea what Jingtie was, simply shrugged that off, forgetting all about it.

As spring became summer, the withered ivy came back to life, its vibrant green tendrils covering the hut. The grape trellis grew heavy with twisting vines, and the water barrel brimmed with white lotus blossoms,

their small, round leaves floating like ripples spreading across the water. Tang Shiqi lounged on a chaise, basking in the sun. So much had happened recently. Shu Qing had defected to the Western Regions, and the new Kinnara was leading a team of undercover agents to hunt him down. Chiyan had gone missing; he'd reportedly been caught in a snowstorm on some northern mountain, and his fate was unknown.

The Eastern Depot still hunted Xiahou Lian, though the dark-faced officer who'd shot at Tang Shiqi hadn't been seen again. In their relentless pursuit, the depot dismantled several Garden brothels and relay stations, sending captured assassins and undercover agents to the capital. Fear gripped everyone. With no business to conduct, people stayed home, too afraid to venture out. The crackdown spread across the underworld. Officers routinely raided gambling dens, taverns, and brothels, interrogating patrons and checking household registrations, then throwing those without proper documentation into prison. Many establishments failed to survive the scrutiny and shut down.

As the weather cooled, the lotus flowers in the barrel withered, leaving behind only a few yellowed stems. One day, a light rain fell, the misty drizzle pattering crisply on the ground like fine needles. Tang Shiqi sat on the doorstep, resting his head in his hands. Suddenly, a figure emerged through the rain—a man in a bamboo hat and a straw raincoat, beneath which the dark hilt of his blade was faintly visible.

Tang Shiqi stood and called out, "Boss!"

Stepping under the wide eaves, Xiahou Lian removed his hat and raincoat. He shook his damp black hair and brushed rainwater from his clothes. "Get me some hot soup."

“On it!” Tang Shiqi chirped. Barely containing his excitement, he brought Xiahou Lian a bowl of soup. “So did you get the meteoric iron?”

Xiahou Lian entered the house, peeling off his clothes to reveal firm bronzed muscles crisscrossed with scars. Layers of silver thread wrapped his body, as fine and intricate as the silk of a cocoon. Unwinding the threads, Xiahou Lian placed them on the square table. Donning a pair of silver gloves, he lifted one of the threads. The thin strand gleamed faintly, catching the light streaming through the doorway as Xiahou Lian stretched it taut. A fly buzzed into the room, oblivious to the thread stretched between Xiahou Lian’s fingers. As it flew past, the thread sliced it cleanly in two, the halves dropping onto the table.

Tang Shiqi stared, dumbfounded.

“Give me a few days to recover,” Xiahou Lian said. “Then I’ll head back to the Garden to kill Shixin.”

Chapter 54:
A Sorrowful Farewell

XIAHOU LIAN WAS IN THE KITCHEN ladling himself some water while Tang Shiqi lounged against the doorframe, idly poking at the small holes worms had eaten in the wood.

"Chiyan's gone missing up north, Boss," Tang Shiqi said casually.

Xiahou Lian froze, his back still turned. The room fell into silence, quiet but for the faint buzz of insects in the dark night where sparse stars twinkled faintly. The breeze carried the earthy scent of soil mixed with hints of grass and flowers.

Unsettled, Tang Shiqi rambled on to fill the silence. "Oh—and, Boss, you should probably avoid going out for a few days. The Garden's been hit hard—a lot of people have been captured recently. Word is that Shen Jue's arrests are so quick and precise because he's got a mole inside the Garden. You've made it onto the wanted list, by the way. Seen your portrait on the city walls yet? A few months ago, I got careless and ran into the Eastern Depot. Ended up taking an arrow and nearly bit the dust, but hey, luck was on my side." He tugged at his collar, revealing the scar on his shoulder. "You're quite the celebrity, to have the top spot on the Eastern Depot's hit list."

Xiahou Lian glanced at Tang Shiqi's scar. The wound had scabbed over, but the danger Tang Shiqi had been in was obvious. Xiahou Lian had known for some time that the Eastern Depot was hunting him; how could he not, when posters of his face were plastered across every town he'd passed through on his journey back from the Tian Shan mountains? Unlike the

other Eight Legions assassins, whose identities remained hidden, Xiahou Lian's image stood out boldly; that made him the easiest target.

He'd been wise to avoid the Garden's relay stations throughout his travels. He'd passed one surrounded by depot agents; they'd been hauling people out into the sunlight one by one and tearing off their human-skin masks, while a crowd of onlookers watched from a distance, held back by a wall of agents. A eunuch on horseback rode around the crowd, cold and aloof. "By order of the depot chief, leave no Qiye Garden rebel alive!"

Captured agents were brought to the riverbank and thrown into the raging waters one after another. Their bodies sank into the surging rapids, some bobbing up momentarily before being swallowed whole.

As the eunuch rode past him, Xiahou Lian had asked, "Sir, may I inquire—did the depot chief also issue the warrant for the Wuminggui?"

The eunuch glanced at him with disdain and tossed a wanted poster at his face. "Personally signed by the depot chief. Do you doubt it?"

Xiahou Lian picked up the poster and stared at an artist's image of his own face, smeared with the word *kill* in glaring red ink. It looked as though it had been painted in blood, the script ominous and cruel.

Now, staring at Tang Shiqi's scar, Xiahou Lian couldn't deny the truth any longer: The order to "leave no Qiye Garden rebel alive" clearly included him.

Would Shen Jue come for him personally? Xiahou Lian considered it. Shen Jue had to know that Xiahou Lian couldn't leave the Garden for long; he wouldn't survive without the antidote to Seven Fifteen.

Time changes everything, Xiahou Lian thought. *Even the people you trust.* Uncle Duan, who'd cared for him as a child, had killed Xiahou Lian's

mother. His oldest friend had become his enemy.

Without a word, Xiahou Lian set the ladle down on the table. His hand brushed a tray of dishes and knocked them to the floor. The sharp clatter of shattering ceramics echoed through the quiet. He knelt and began picking up the jagged pieces, seeming not to notice when one cut his hand. Tang Shiqi hurried over to stop him, but he froze as Xiahou Lian began to mutter in a hoarse voice.

“There’s something you don’t know. Shen Jue and I—we’ve been through life and death together. We were brothers.”

Tang Shiqi was stunned for a moment, then slammed his hand on the table. “Shen Jue? How could he do this to you?! Sure, he’s an imperial lapdog and you’re a rebel assassin, but if you went through life and death together? Talk about poor judgment! Forget him, Boss. We don’t need to grovel to power-hungry traitors. Maybe someday history will remember us as heroes who fought back against corruption!”

Xiahou Lian remained silent as he sat down on the doorstep to bandage his injured hand. Tang Shiqi hesitated, sensing a heaviness in the air around Xiahou Lian as if the weight of the night sky itself pressed down on his shoulders. The wind rustled the leaves, their shadows flickering chaotically across the ground. Tang Shiqi picked up some plantain leaves near his feet and shredded them to pieces.

“The Eastern Depot and Qiye Garden have been enemies for years,” Xiahou Lian said softly, his head lowered. “We’ve killed plenty of them, and they’ve done the same to us. I’m the Garden’s top assassin, and he’s the Eastern Depot’s chief. It’s only natural he’d want me dead.” Xiahou Lian

chuckled bitterly. “My master once said I had a glimmer of hope. But hope—assassins don’t have that.”

Stumbling over his words, Tang Shiqi tried to comfort Xiahou Lian. “Boss, don’t think like that!”

“When I return to the Garden this time, I probably won’t come out alive,” Xiahou Lian continued. “The silver in the dens in Liuzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and the banks is yours—take it all. Do it quickly—once I kill Shixin, you won’t be able to get to it.”

“Boss, that’s way too much—”

“After the Garden falls, go to the mountains and find my body, if you can. Take my head and hand it over to the Eastern Depot.” Xiahou Lian gave these instructions matter-of-factly, as if describing the weather.

“Have you gone mad?!” Tang Shiqi shouted.

Xiahou Lian flexed his bandaged hand, the dressing tight and uncomfortable. He felt a faint ache that mirrored the hollow pang in his heart—subtle, constant, and unquestionably real.

“When Shen Jue first entered the palace, all I wanted was to get him out. I wanted him to keep studying, take the imperial exams and become someone important. When I first met Chiyan, I wanted to bring him down from that cursed Heimianfo and teach him about the world so he wouldn’t be reduced to a weapon. But now…now I know I can’t do shit,” Xiahou Lian said, smiling faintly, his voice as soft as the wind brushing through the withered branches. “Shen Jue’s enemies are powerful. There’s not much I can do to help him. But whatever I can do, I will.”

Tang Shiqi sighed deeply. “Boss, I don’t even know what to say to that. Giving away your money is one thing, but your *head*? Don’t you at

least want to keep your corpse intact?”

“That doesn’t matter for a sinner like me, does it?” Xiahou Lian stood and waved Tang Shiqi off. “I’m going to bed.”

Tang Shiqi opened his mouth to protest but closed it again, leaving his words unvoiced. Fugitives like them lived one day at a time and didn’t much worry about gods or Buddhas. But for those who walked the path of darkness long enough, a faint sense of dread began to linger. Some wore prayer beads and others left donations at temples, praying they wouldn’t be condemned to endless torment after death.

The lowest level of hell awaited those who committed patricide, one of the gravest sins. But Tang Shiqi knew that Xiahou Lian didn’t lack either faith or fear—he’d simply accepted his fate. He knew his bones would be scattered on the frozen plains, his soul drifting like a wind.

Xiahou Lian had given up on this life—and the next.

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THE MOUNTAIN TEMPLE HAD fallen even further into disrepair. Half the roof tiles were missing, the rotting beams exposed beneath resembled the bones of a decaying corpse. The walls, once painted yellow and adorned with red-ink inscriptions of Buddhist scriptures, were now peeling and mottled like an aging woman’s heavily powdered face. Scattered across the walls were countless black footprints, large and small, high and low—half of them had been the handiwork of a young Xiahou Lian. A line of weeds

and a few tiny red and yellow wildflowers sprouted along the base of the wall.

Under the wide eaves sat a low red-lacquered table and two small stools. The lacquer was chipped in a number of places, and one leg of the table was shorter than the others; it had been propped up with a few bricks to steady the surface. Atop the table rested a small purple clay teapot and two chipped blue-and-white porcelain bowls—the abbot's most prized possessions. Xiahou Lian rarely saw him use them; like many people accustomed to poverty, he hoarded his treasures like sacred relics, as if afraid that their loss would render his life even poorer.

As always, Shixin sat on one stool with his hands folded in his lap, dressed in a monk's black robe. He looked as though he'd been waiting for a long time. Xiahou Lian sat opposite him. The abbot picked up the teapot and poured tea into a bowl for Xiahou Lian, foam swirling in the steaming liquid.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Xiahou Lian asked quietly. "Were you waiting for me?"

Shixin's answer was indirect. "I was having tea," he replied, reaching down to lift a copper pipe from the ground. The pipe was old but well-maintained, its long stem polished to a glossy shine. Shixin packed tobacco into the bowl, took a puff, and exhaled a cloud of white smoke.

Xiahou Lian was surprised. He'd never known that the abbot smoked.

He drank his tea like water, not bothering to savor it. The bitter liquid flowed down his throat and into his chest, his heart pounding with its heat. Outside, a fine, needle-like rain began to fall, the drizzle typical of autumn in the mountains. Drinking tea and smoking together, Xiahou Lian and the

abbot sat face to face for the first time. The tobacco's aroma was sweet and not at all harsh. To an outsider, the men might've looked like any ordinary father and son sharing a moment of quiet intimacy, rather than two enemies bound by deep hatred.

Xiahou Lian studied the man across from him. Shixin's features were sharp and deep-set; his white beard and deeply etched wrinkles betrayed years of heavy contemplation. Xiahou Lian felt surprisingly calm, as though he were here simply to make small talk about the rainy weather.

"You originally chose me. Why did you send Chiyan instead?" Xiahou Lian asked.

Shixin raised his head, gazing at the misty rain that blanketed the mountains. "Remember this: When you set down your burdens, someone else must carry them for you. In the past, that person was your mother: You let the young master of the Xie family escape, and she bore the punishment in your place. Now, it's your brother: You refused to go to the northern frontier, so he went to battle in your place. That foolish boy lied to me to fulfill your wish." Shixin exhaled a smoke ring, his tone blending pride and disappointment. "Lied to me. Imagine that."

Xiahou Lian felt a dull ache in his chest. He remembered the day Chiyan had asked him if he wanted to be abbot. He remembered Chiyan sitting alone atop Heimianfo, playing his xun. He recalled the sorrow in Chiyan's eyes, the way the wind tugged at the sleeves of the lonely assassin's robe, making them flutter like the wings of a pale moth. How had he failed to see that the scatterbrained fool was saying goodbye?

"How did you know that I was coming to kill you?" Xiahou Lian asked, his voice hoarse.

“You’re still young, and you’re not careful enough. You must work on that. The archives in the document room haven’t been touched in years. They’re covered in dust. Yet the Garuda’s file is clean. Who but you would bother to look at it?” Shixin explained. “I know you, Xiahou Lian. I knew you’d come for me. As for Chiyan, he wanted to go, so I let him.”

“So that’s how it is,” Xiahou Lian said with a bitter laugh. “From the moment you saw that file, you knew I’d come to kill you. You’ve been waiting for me all this time. You’re too arrogant, you old bald donkey. Maybe I couldn’t beat you before, but now, who knows?”

“I don’t want you to die by my hand. After all, you’re my child,” Shixin sighed. “I only hope you’ll grow strong enough to do what you must. The Garden holds many secrets, Xiao-Lian. If you kill me today, it will prove you are strong enough for those secrets to be revealed to you.”

Anger surged in Xiahou Lian’s chest, but he forced it back down. “Secrets? About your enemies in the northern frontier, you mean? That’s your problem, not mine! It was *your* cowardice that doomed your predecessors, so why should Chiyan and I pay for your mistakes? Because we’re your sons? Ridiculous! I, Xiahou Lian, have no father. I had only my mother: Xiahou Pei, master of Hengbo, the greatest blade in the world. My name is Xiahou Lian—my surname is *Xiahou*!”

Xiahou Lian stood, and Hengbo left its black sheath like a stream of quicksilver. Xiahou Lian raised the blade, and the fine drizzle pattered its edge, the tiny, scattered droplets shimmering like stars. “Enough talk. Everyone has their debts, and today, I’ve come to collect yours. Draw Bushenglian, Shixin!”

“No need,” Shixin replied. “I’m old. An old man should just drink tea and smoke, so I’ll use my pipe instead—it’s an old friend. Let’s see just how far your swordplay has come.”

Shixin’s eyes suddenly snapped upward, and the veins on his aged forehead bulged. With a powerful slap, he shattered the low table into splinters, sending shards of wood flying through the air. The purple clay teapot and two small cups were flung skyward.

Xiahou Lian’s blade flashed, slicing through the teapot and cups with deadly precision. The severed pieces fell neatly apart, and Hengbo’s razor-sharp edge passed just before Shixin’s face.

Shixin quickly retreated, stepping into the rain. With his soaked black robe clinging to his thin frame, he looked like a solitary, withered bamboo stalk. He let out a soft sigh, as though lamenting the loss of his treasured teapot.

Xiahou Lian stepped into the rain as well, both hands gripping Hengbo. His own black robes fluttered as he moved. He carefully regulated his breathing. With one step, he breathed in; with the next step, he exhaled. With each step, his pace quickened, and his breath matched its rhythm. Within the sound of the drizzle, he heard his own labored breathing. It hit the perfect rhythm on his fifth step. Instantly, Xiahou Lian launched forward, cutting through the cold rain toward the black-robed monk. His sleeves billowed behind him like a dark butterfly’s trembling wings.

Clang! The sharp, clear sound of metal meeting metal echoed as Shixin casually raised his worn copper pipe to block Hengbo’s fierce strike. Shixin shook his head slightly, pressing the pipe down on Hengbo’s blade

and gliding it over Xiahou Lian's right wrist before striking the acupoint in his shoulder.

Xiahou Lian felt as if he'd been stung by a wasp. Numbness and pain spread down his arm, and he nearly lost his grip on Hengbo. He gritted his teeth, tightening his hold on the blade. But he didn't have time to deliver his next strike before Shixin reversed his grip on his pipe, then landed a punch directly in Xiahou Lian's face.

The world spun as Xiahou Lian fell, He tasted dirt and the metallic tang of blood. Cold raindrops splattered his face and chilled him to the bone. *I didn't last a single move against Shixin—even though his only weapon is an old pipe!*

Shixin stood where he was, watching Xiahou Lian with pity. "See now, Xiao-Lian? That's the difference between us. You seem to have forgotten that *I* trained Chiyan in swordplay. You also forgot that even your mother couldn't best Bushenglian. Even with my injured right hand, I can defeat you effortlessly. Your skills with the saber truly fall short!"

"Shut up!"

Xiahou Lian struggled to his feet, wiping the blood and water from his face, and charged again. Rainwater splashed beneath his feet, mud staining his shoes and socks. His eyes burned with fierce, unyielding determination as he swung his blade at Shixin, undaunted in the face of death.

Hengbo turned and spun in his hands, its powerful glare enveloping both fighters. The clash of steel rang out like twanging zither strings—not just from the brute force of two weapons clashing, but from Shixin blocking Xiahou Lian's every blow. Rain and falling leaves swirled around them as

they fought fiercely. Xiahou Lian launched a rapid series of attacks, forcing Shixin to parry and retreat. They circled the courtyard once, but Xiahou Lian had yet to touch even the hem of Shixin's robe!

He realized then that his relentless attacks had nearly exhausted him while Shixin moved as calmly as if he were strolling through a garden.

At the start of the next round, a withered yellow leaf drifted between them. Xiahou Lian's blade sliced through it, and at the same moment, a sharp whistle cut through the air. Xiahou Lian saw Shixin's pipe pierce the gap between the two halves of the leaf before it struck his head; the heavy blow rang like a bell in his brain.

His head spun, his vision blurring as the tolling bell echoed in his ears, heavy and slow. It felt as if his heartbeat had grown slow too. He dropped to his knees, then collapsed forward. Cold leaves stuck to his cheek—bone-chillingly cold.

"Your bladework has always been lacking," Shixin sighed. "Xiahou Pei spoiled you—while others practiced their swordplay, you were out climbing trees, robbing nests, and burning down my mountain temple. I schemed and plotted, I even killed Xiahou Pei, all to make you stronger. And you did improve…just not enough."

Xiahou Lian coughed up blood, pushed himself off the ground, and stood again. Blood streamed from his forehead. His face was smeared with dirt and ash, and he looked like a mangy kicked dog.

"Screw you!" he roared, spitting out a mouthful of blood. "Again!"

Their third charge began. Xiahou Lian lunged at Shixin. Their figures merged into one, tall, lean, and clad in black like two ink strokes bleeding together. Xiahou Lian struck with all his might—Swallow's Swoop, Moon

Cleave, Serpent Step—the cold light of the blade enveloping them and weaving a dense net. Yet Shixin's pipe seemed to descend from the heavens, appearing like a ghost from unexpected angles to strike Xiahou Lian's pressure points with precision—first his thighs, then his knees, then his chest, elbows, wrists, and back. No part of him was spared.

The pain! He felt as if a boulder were crushing his chest, suffocating him. Xiahou Lian spat out blood, roaring as he delivered a vertical slash. Shixin's pipe slid along Hengbo's blade with a grating sound, then struck Xiahou Lian's arm. Hengbo slipped from the younger man's grasp as he fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

Shixin looked down at him. "You can't defeat me. Will you keep going?"

Xiahou Lian didn't have the strength to respond. He stretched out his hand to reach for Hengbo's hilt; mud and blood, sticky and slick, covered his hand. The pain in his legs spread as he pushed himself up, but he gritted his teeth and didn't let out a single groan. When he couldn't stand the first time, he tried again. It took him three attempts, but he finally stood, leaning on Hengbo.

"Again!" Xiahou Lian roared hoarsely.

And so he charged over and over, only for Shixin to knock him down each time. Xiahou Lian was like a stubborn child, a headstrong calf, refusing to adapt, surrender, or yield. Even after being beaten, he would bite back. Knocked down for the twenty-sixth time, he ate another mouthful of dirty leaves, the metallic taste overwhelming his brain. Shixin's pipe had struck pressure points on all his limbs, leaving them weak and numb, as if countless tiny insects were burrowing through his veins.

Get up! Get up! Xiahou Lian clenched his teeth, tears in his eyes, and stood for the twenty-sixth time, dragging Hengbo behind him as he stumbled toward Shixin.

The Garden's Moon Cleave saber art!

The light of Hengbo's blade surged like a tidal wave, crashing toward Shixin with overwhelming force. Shixin remained expressionless, only drawing his pipe once the blade's momentum was directly in front of him, as heavy as a mountain and as cold as the moon. He struck Xiahou Lian's elbow, sending Hengbo clattering to the ground. Then Shixin swung his fist, landing the blow in Xiahou Lian's face.

Blood spurted from the young man's nose as his body fell backward in the rain. Every part of him ached as if it had been shattered—as if the slightest movement would make his bones creak and groan.

"You're too weak, Xiahou Lian," Shixin said, his eyes full of deep disappointment. "I thought you were the Garden's hope, but it turns out you're just a fragile child. Give up. It's fine. I overestimated you."

Xiahou Lian gasped for breath, his right eye swollen, half his face bruised and bloody. His entire visage was a patchwork of greens and purples; his head resembled that of a battered pig. He swayed on his feet but managed to stand and force his chin up to glare hatefully at Shixin.

"You're right, you old old bald donkey. My bladework sucks. Maybe when my mother had me and Chiyan, she gave him all her talent for the blade, and all I got was her taste for food, booze, and mischief." Xiahou Lian wiped blood from the corner of his mouth. "But heaven never seals every exit. Open your dull eyes, old man. What do you think *this* is?"

With that, Xiahou Lian raised his right hand, which now wore a silver glove that glimmered in the rain.

Shixin's pupils contracted.

As Xiahou Lian flexed his fingers, fallen leaves on the ground stirred. Then, a net like a giant spiderweb rose from the earth, silently ensnaring Shixin. The net was nearly invisible to the naked eye, but fine raindrops clung to the threads and flowed along them, revealing their presence. Countless leaves swirled and tumbled in the air, only to be abruptly sliced into halves, or thirds, or even smaller pieces.

"Qianji Thread," Shixin murmured. "To think that you managed to rediscover Qianji Thread!"

Dashing around the courtyard had been a ruse that allowed Xiahou Lian to set up this inescapable net. It now surrounded Shixin on all sides; the abbot had no way to retreat.

Xiahou Lian looked at him. "Do you have any last words, Shixin?" he asked softly.

Shixin lightly brushed his finger against one of the silken threads, and a hair-thin cut appeared immediately; a single crimson bead of blood welled up. A faint smile curled his lips, and he gazed into the distant heavens. "The peerless blade is forged at last," he murmured.

He looked back at Xiahou Lian, his eyes brimming with sorrow that Xiahou Lian couldn't understand. "Xiao-Lian, your seniors opened the gates for you. The road ahead you must walk alone… We'll…never meet again."

Xiahou Lian froze, his fingers stiffening. For a moment, he couldn't bring himself to do it. Then he thought of his mother and Chiyan, and

hatred surged within him again. Clenching his teeth, he crooked his fingers.

The silk threads stretched taut, tension traveling up the countless filaments as the enormous net began to shrink. Raindrops raced along the nearly invisible strands like liquid silver. The dazzling lines flashed before Shixin's eyes as dull pain blossomed across his body. Something pierced his skull, and the world spun and upended. He watched himself drift away from his body as the black-robed form fragmented into countless cubical segments awash in blood. Then, he collapsed in pieces to the ground, like a child's toppled tower of blocks.

In his final moments, his gaze fell upon the boy clad in coarse black hemp who stood frozen in the distance, tears etching silent paths down his cheeks. Suddenly, it was decades earlier. A child with Xiahou Lian's eyes ran toward the temple gates wearing scuffed grass sandals. He was only a little taller than the threshold. Sucking his thumb, he stared up at Shixin.

After a moment of hesitation, Shixin took a piece of candy from the altar. "Want one?" he asked.

The boy's eyes burned with unmistakable longing, but he forced a proud expression onto his face. "No!"

A hollow thud echoed in Shixin's ears—the sound of his own head hitting the ground. The boy in the distance still wept silently. Shixin tried to speak. *"Don't cry, Xiao-Lian,"* he wanted to say. *"You shouldn't. You're a big boy now."*

But Shixin couldn't speak; he no longer had a throat nor a way to make sound. Everything faded away, sinking into the silent darkness like water.

His life had finally come to an end.

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XIAHOU LIAN SAT ON THE THRESHOLD, staring blankly at the long set of stairs.

He'd killed those he needed to kill, avenged all that needed avenging. His affairs were settled. The forest was dense, and morning glories climbed the steps, blooming brilliantly.

Feeling something sticky on his hand, he looked down to see that he was still bleeding. He put pressure on the wound, picked up Hengbo, set fire to Heimianfo, and stumbled back to his bamboo hut.

Behind him, a man in a black cloak emerged from the shadows—Duan Jiu. He watched Xiahou Lian retreat, then turned to look at the Qianji Thread draped like a spiderweb across the courtyard.

"What a stunning, deadly weapon," Duan Jiu murmured with a soft laugh before turning to disappear into the darkness.

Xiahou Lian's bamboo hut stood alone in the forest, surrounded by live bamboo and trees, wildflowers blooming all around. Xiahou Lian pushed open the door and entered his room. It was quiet but for the floor creaking under his feet. He was so tired; he just wanted to rest. He didn't bother bandaging his wounds. He knew the bleeding would take his life, but his affairs were finally settled.

As he sat on the heated bed, he noticed the corner of a letter peeking from under his pillow. Frowning in confusion, he pulled it out and opened it.

My brother,

I am headed north, and I do not know when I will return. In Jinling, I owe Auntie at the Confucius Temple three taels of silver for her crab-roe buns. Please repay her on my behalf. Also, a stray cat lives under the western side of Wanxiang Tower. I promised it some cake but never provided it. Please give the cat cake for me.

The road north is long. Do not worry about me. I do not fear the hardships of life and death, only that you might worry. I have lived on the mountain for so long and never fully experienced the world. I have heard of the autumn frost at Fengqiao, the evening bells of Hanshan Temple, and the songs of Wu River, all renowned. I often wished to visit those places with you, but there was never time. You and I share the same voice and appearance. I hope you will walk the world in my stead and see it with your eyes so that I may have no regrets.

May you live year after year in peace and joy, free from worry.

Your brother,

Chiyan

Chiyan's handwriting was as precise as his personality—calm and clear. Xiahou Lian traced the characters, his tears falling and smudging the ink. He coughed up blood, tucked the letter over his chest, and took Hengbo with him as he stumbled out the door again, headed for the Blade Cemetery. He bled the whole way, leaving a bloody footprint with every step. Sometimes he paused to lean against a bamboo stalk and rest, leaving

behind a crimson handprint. After a dozen yards or so, his legs gave out, and he tumbled down the slope, rolling all the way to the bottom.

He didn’t plan to go any farther. He lay in the bamboo forest, looking up at the sky. The rain had just stopped, the wind had lightened, and the clouds had thinned. Sunbeams filtered through the bamboo leaves and cast dappled shadows that danced over his body. He raised his hand, reaching for the brilliant sunlight.

In this life, his mother had died, and his master had perished; his childhood friend now saw him as an enemy; and his elder brother and shidi were nowhere to be found. His loved ones, his friends…they were all gone. The only companions seeing him off were the sky, the clouds, and the rustling bamboo sea.

It wasn’t so bad. After all, his hands were stained with blood; his crimes were heinous, and he deserved no forgiveness.

Those who killed would be killed in turn.

Retribution upon him had come at just the right time.

ARC 2

A DECADE OF RAIN AND LANTERNS IN THE JIANGHU

Chapter 55:
Rain and Night in the Jianghu

THE STORM RAGED on through the night.

The sky had turned its back, plunging everything into darkness. Thunder rumbled and lightning streaked the heavens, the wind howling as rain poured down. The once brightly lit, bustling streets were now full of panic and chaos. Vendors hurriedly packed up their stalls, and under the eaves of tea houses, peddlers taking shelter from the rain bought bowls of steaming hot tea and leaned on their carrying poles. Coachmen urged their horses forward, and the wheels of one carriage crushed a bamboo winnowing basket that had rolled into the middle of the street. Pedestrians ran around covering their heads with their sleeves but were drenched head to toe within moments.

In a small courtyard on Jinggong Lane behind Fuxiang Temple, Shen Jue sat under the eaves, holding a cup of hot tea. An oil-paper umbrella rested against his feet. He listened quietly to the sounds of people rushing around outside. While fallen leaves swirled and danced in the courtyard, the rain fell, as furious as boiling water.

In the storm, he faintly heard the rumble of hoofbeats growing louder and louder, and a group of black-clad riders in raincoats galloped through the rain. Shen Jue sighed softly and looked out into the courtyard, his gaze as still as the moon.

Ten years. It’d been ten years since he last saw Xiahou Lian in the Cold Palace.

For a while, he still heard news of Xiahou Lian. The Wuminggui had reportedly inherited Hengbo; he was said to be a rising star in the Garden, moving stealthily through the night with his puppet, Zhaoye, and killing without a sound. Later, he heard that Xiahou Lian had wandered the brothels of Suzhou and Hangzhou, singing and carousing, his wild behavior earning him the adoration of courtesans and entertainers alike. Next, informants from the Garden reported that Xiahou Lian had assassinated Shixin alone, causing strife within the Garden, then disappeared into thin air.

He was like a dewdrop evaporating in the sun, vanishing without a trace.

A year ago, Shen Jue's men had unexpectedly discovered Hengbo up for auction in a Taizhou black market. He'd interrogated the auctioneer, who confessed to having retrieved the blade from a pile of corpses after pirates attacked Taizhou. Still, that didn't prove that Xiahou Lian had ever made it to Taizhou. Three Ghost Festivals had passed since Xiahou Lian fled the Garden, so in truth, there was no way he could still be alive.

At first, Shen Jue held on to hope, but as time passed, that hope grew fainter and fainter. Today it was finally depleted. Perhaps it was time that he faced reality. Xiahou Lian might've died the day he assassinated Shixin, or perhaps the Seven Fifteen poison had overcome him on a random fifteenth day of the seventh month. His body had likely rotted in the dirt and been eaten by vultures and maggots. Shen Jue's antidote, Hope's Return, would never reach Xiahou Lian's hands.

He and Xiahou Lian wouldn't meet again, unless perhaps in another life.

Wind, rain, and fallen leaves filled the courtyard. Shen Jue looked down at the water gushing from the eaves and the leaves swirling away on the current. He reached out to catch a raindrop that fell from the roof tiles. It chilled his palm, and as the wind blew, his face felt just as cold.

The old emperor was critically ill. Although he was issued one prescription after another, there was no improvement to his health. Meanwhile, Shen Jue had finally broken with Wei De, plunging himself into circumstances he couldn't reverse. Half the court officials watched smugly but passively, while the other half fanned the flames, eager for Shen Jue's downfall.

Xiahou Lian was no longer in this world. Shen Jue had no one to rely on, so he could now set aside all other concerns and fight with everything he had. It didn't matter to him whether he won or lost the battle ahead—his life and death were in fate's hands alone.

The hoofbeats reached the gate and stopped, followed by a firm knock. When Shen Jue didn't respond, the door opened on its own. In strode Qian Zhengde dressed in a crimson robe embroidered with pythons and a gold-threaded hat, an umbrella in his hand. The fat on his plump, pale cheeks made him squint.

After Shen Jue's fall from power, Qian Zhengde had been promoted to the prestigious and powerful position of Eastern Depot chief. The tide had turned, as the saying went. Shen Jue had enjoyed glory for many years, always overshadowing Qian Zhengde; now it was finally Qian Zhengde's turn. He walked into the courtyard and looked down at Shen Jiu, his thin red lips curling into a faint smile. "I hope you've been well, Shen-gonggong."

“Thank you for your concern, Qian-gonggong,” Shen Jue replied with a slight nod. He sat in a rosewood armchair, holding a cup of tea, as calm and composed as if it were some stray on the roadside—not *him*—who’d fallen from grace.

Qian Zhengde watched coldly, sneering inwardly at Shen Jue’s facade. “His Majesty has decreed that you will guard the imperial tombs in Nanjing. You are to set off at once. Our venerable patron, in his boundless mercy, acknowledges your decade of service and has graciously sent me to see you off.” Qian Zhengde bowed with a smile. “Nanjing is quite pleasant, I hear. The nightly revelries on Qinhuai River outshine even those in the capital. Fortunately, you will enjoy a peaceful retirement there, Shen-gonggong.”

“Most eunuchs exiled to Nanjing’s tombs are lucky to be sent there on an old horse. I am truly overwhelmed that a powerless outcast like me should merit you as a personal escort, Qian-gonggong,” Shen Jue said, lowering his head to trace the rim of his celadon teacup. He gave a slight smile. “Of course, I suspect you’re here to transport not me, but my corpse. The assassins two days ago were our father’s handiwork, weren’t they? To think he could view insignificant Shen Jue as such a threat! I’m truly unworthy.”

Qian Zhengde threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, Shen Jue. Even if you knew, why come out and say it? The moon’s reflection in the water may be but an illusion, but so long as it’s undisturbed, it can still delight you. I planned to add a little something to your meal before you departed—give you a nice, quick send-off. But it seems there’s no need.” He shook his head. “When a tree falls, the monkeys scatter. But your tree is still healthy and towering, and its robust roots have sprawled out, impossible to prune.

Our esteemed father dreads your former allies to the point of sleeplessness. He won't rest easy until you descend to meet the King of Hell himself. Ha! You may be a clever man, but you're still a colossal fool. You were doing so well as chief of the Eastern Depot! Why go and challenge him? Look how far you've fallen."

Shen Jue didn't answer, just smiled faintly at Qian Zhengde. "May I ask how old Father is this year?" he asked.

"His esteemed self is eighty-one," Qian Zhengde replied, uncertain why Shen Jue had asked.

"Eighty-one…" Shen Jue murmured softly, eyes downcast beneath his long, gently curving lashes. When he raised them, they were full of dark clouds, his brows and the corners of his eyes brimming with stormy intensity. Through clenched teeth, he almost hissed, "Eighty-one! A candle flame nearing its end. Who knows when or where he'll breathe his last? How could I sit back and let him die peacefully in his bed?!"

"You…you're mad!" Qian Zhengde shouted, pointing a trembling finger at him. "To think you were hiding such treacherous thoughts! You can forget about leaving through that door alive! Guards! Kill this beast!"

The tips of black arrows rose above the top of the courtyard wall. The riders he'd heard before were now standing on their comrades' shoulders, their crossbows aimed at Shen Jue's figure beneath the eaves. The sharp black arrowheads glinted with cold silver light. Shen Jue didn't move. The tea in his cup had chilled, and rain continued to pour, battering and crushing the hydrangeas in the corner of the courtyard.

"Shoot!" Qian Zhengde bellowed.

The arrows flew, dozens of bolts carving through the dark night and piercing the heavy rain. Shen Jue's long, curved lashes fluttered as he watched the plump eunuch before him fall heavily to his knees, then face-first onto the ground, revealing the dense cluster of black arrows in his back. He looked like a porcupine. His eyes were still wide in disbelief as his blood pooled beneath him. It mingled with the rainwater, soaking the cold green moss as it flowed into the dark gutter below the wall.

Shen Jue set down his teacup, opened his oilpaper umbrella, and stepped over the flowing blood. He walked past Qian Zhengde's pale, plump face and out the gate. The riders stood in the rain, their black crossbows dripping with water. Under their raincoats, the qilin embroidered on their black robes seemed to snarl and glare.

Situ Jin draped a raincoat over Shen Jue's shoulders, and Shen Jue took his horse's reins, then nodded to the riders. "Thank you, men."

"You honor us, Depot Chief!" one rider shouted. "Had you not investigated the Embroidered Uniform Guard's unjust imprisonments three years ago, I would've died in prison!"

"Depot Chief, you gave promotions based on merit!" cried another. "If not for you, I'd be an unknown officer to this day!"

"Wei De only promoted his own," added a third. "Without you, Depot Chief, we'd never have had a chance!"

Kneeling, the riders declared in unison, "We're ready to serve you with all our hearts. We devote our lives to your cause!"

"Without you men, there would be no Shen Jue!" Shen Jue cried in response. Mounting his horse, he looked toward the imperial palace. "The day I return to the capital will be the day Wei De meets his end!"

In the midst of the wailing storm, the riders surged ahead like a dark tide and disappeared into the heavy rain.

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THE DAWN SKY WAS A HAZY bluish gray touched with the faintest glow of light in the east. The quiet of Yanzhi Alley stood in stark contrast to its typical nighttime bustle; it was usually full of crowds, singing birds, and shining lanterns.

In Yunxian Tower's storage room, Xiahou Lian rose from his straw bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and stepped outside. Drawing water from the well, he brushed his teeth, rinsed his mouth, and washed his face. Once tidied, he passed through a side gate to the kitchen to boil water. On the way, he passed other young servants, exchanging nods in silent greeting. One by one, he carried water buckets to the courtyard's west wing and placed them at the door. A wooden plaque hung over the door read *Warm Retreat*, the three bold characters written in a flowing hand. Inside, all was quiet—everyone was likely still asleep.

Xiahou Lian carried the water into the side room and poured it into a jujube-wood tub. The room was in disarray—on the floor lay one embroidered shoe, and there was a crumpled silver-red robe under a small incense table, looking like a discarded rag. On the ground was an overturned basin; a square porcelain jar had also fallen over, the water it had held long since spilled. Even a tuberose blossom had been stepped on, its petals tattered and scattered. Clearly, quite a *battle* had taken place in this room the previous night.

Xiahou Lian pretended not to notice. He filled the tub and scattered a thick layer of rose petals over the surface, ensuring that it was entirely covered.

This was required as part of one of the daily rituals of A-Chu, Yunxian Tower's most celebrated courtesan. Every morning, without fail, she bathed in rose petals. Xiahou Lian had been at Yunxian Tower for four months now, and for all that time, he'd lugged the water here for A-Chu's baths. He stacked the empty buckets outside, then went to the kitchen for a flatbread, five steamed buns, and a jug of water. Sitting on the veranda, he ate slowly—he had only a few tasks, so there was no need to rush.

It had rained heavily the night before, leaving the ground damp and water pooling in the cracks between bricks. The courtyard flowers and grasses looked wilted, and A-Chu's beloved potted clivia plants had apparently died, their pale petals scattered on the ground. Xiahou Lian had forgotten to move them indoors the previous evening; when A-Chu saw that, there would surely be trouble.

The neighboring courtyard was already noisy. It housed the male courtesans, one of whom had a bad temper and often beat young servants half to death. The boys sometimes came to Xiahou Lian to complain.

Time had flown; Xiahou Lian had left Qiye Garden three years earlier. He'd expected to bleed to death that day in the Garden, but to his surprise, he'd awakened very much alive. After much deliberation, he traveled to Qixia Mountain to seek Qiu Shan, the abbot of Qixia Temple. Qiu Shan had let Xiahou Lian live at the temple in the guise of a monk who'd kept his hair, helping Xiahou Lian alter his appearance drastically. For five months, Xiahou Lian had swept the temple grounds, his head

wrapped in bandages. The temple visitors who saw him left him coins out of pity, likely assuming that his face had been somehow disfigured.

When the bandages were removed, Xiahou Lian had examined his new face in a brass mirror. It wasn't as striking as before, but it was still pleasant to look at. Although his deep-set eyes and prominent nose were untouched, he was satisfied. Since the scar above his eye could not be removed, he learned to cover it with makeup until it was unnoticeable unless inspected closely.

His enemies could no longer identify him; Eastern Depot agents passed him without a second glance. He went to Jinling to settle Chiyan's accounts, then traveled around, admiring the scenery and experiencing the things Chiyan had spoken of. He listened to the bells of Fengqiao Inn, the evening bells of Hanshan Temple, and the songs along the Wu River. He savored the sights and sounds of every place he visited. In Canglang Pavilion, he burned Chiyan's will and scattered the ashes in the flowing water. From then on, he felt, Chiyan wouldn't miss a single mountain or river vista.

During the Ghost Festival, Xiahou Lian dug a grave for himself behind Qixia Temple, then used his last money to buy a simple coffin. He lay inside and closed the lid, waiting quietly for death. The coffin was dark, and his mind raced with wild thoughts. He climbed out several times to relieve himself, once scaring a woodcutter passing by on the mountain trail. He apologized profusely before climbing back into the coffin and eventually falling asleep. When he woke again, it was broad daylight, and he was still alive. Walking over a carpet of fiery-red maple leaves, he returned to Qixia Temple.

He found Qiu Shan sitting on a walkway, drinking tea. Looking at Xiahou Lian's bewildered expression, Qiu Shan said, "The heavens have spared you. You ought to keep living."

"But I'm a sinner," Xiahou Lian objected.

"The most faithless hedonist can achieve enlightenment and attain Buddhahood after endless cycles through a single thought of awakening and goodness. Then they can achieve even more."

Bidding farewell to Qiu Shan, Xiahou Lian began wandering aimlessly. He had no fixed residence and went wherever his feet took him. The trouble was that he had no household registration or identification papers, which made him a drifter. The authorities were zealous about rounding up vagrants—once caught, they would either be registered as outcasts and imprisoned or sent to labor camps in the borderlands. Thus, Xiahou Lian lived in hiding, constantly taking odd jobs to earn enough money to survive. It was a hard life.

When he reached Taizhou, Japanese pirates were laying siege to the city, and the military defenders were recruiting soldiers without requiring identification. Desperate and broke, Xiahou Lian enlisted, staying in the camp for an autumn. During one street battle, a pirate knocked Hengbo from his hands. He killed the pirate, but he couldn't find Hengbo afterward. He later saw it at an auction but lacked the money to buy it back. He'd watched helplessly as Eastern Depot agents carried the blade away.

Out of options, he went to the capital. Living under the Eastern Depot's watchful eyes was especially difficult; the city was relentless in its pursuit of vagrants. Every few days, raids were conducted in the spots where vagrants tended to gather: abandoned temples, shrines, and charity

halls. The Eastern Depot's impenetrable security was impossible to outmaneuver.

During the twelfth month of the previous year, Xiahou Lian had ended up shivering in the woods outside the capital, ravenous and chilled. He hadn't died at his enemies' hands, nor on a Garden battlefield; nonetheless, he was about to starve and freeze to death in the forest. He knew that, if he reached the afterlife that way, his mother would probably laugh at him.

A-Chu happened to be returning from offering incense at a nunnery and found him, then brought him back to Yanzhi Alley. At Yunxian Tower, she introduced him to the madam as a cousin seeking refuge. Having been given a place to stay, Xiahou Lian had finally solved the problem of food and shelter.

A-Chu was a stunning woman with arched brows and misty eyes. When she glanced sideways, she had an enchanting, soul-stealing allure. Her sharp chin and thin lips gave her a slightly fierce appearance that some men preferred; they found it more thrilling to see a defiant-looking woman submit.

As Yunxian Tower's top courtesan, A-Chu had the madam wrapped around her little finger. Men paid twenty or thirty taels of silver just for one night with her. Sometimes, when she was in a bad mood, A-Chu locked herself in her room and refused to see clients no matter how loudly the madam knocked. But A-Chu was A-Chu, the most famous courtesan in all the capital, unmatched in northern circles and rivaling even the famed courtesans of the south. The madam was forced to indulge her. She even sent Xiahou Lian to stand in line for A-Chu's favorite pastries or to fetch braised pig's feet from Chu Tower.

Clients who saw A-Chu as a seductive enchantress had no idea that she liked to eat those pig's feet with her bare hands while drinking with Xiahou Lian. When she was happy, A-Chu acted wild and carefree—and when she was sad, she suddenly grew quiet, stroking her face in the mirror and asking Xiahou Lian whether she looked old.

Xiahou Lian knew he would never understand a madwoman like A-Chu. For one thing, when she asked whether she looked old, she didn't believe him if he said "No," but she got angry if he said "Yes." Xiahou Lian learned it was best to pretend not to hear her and go on drinking his wine. Overall, life at Yunxian Tower was comfortable, and Xiahou Lian rarely left except to run A-Chu's errands.

Still, he needed to retrieve Hengbo. He assumed that the blade was with Shen Jue, the chief of the Eastern Depot—anything the depot acquired inevitably ended up in Shen Jue's hands.

Now and then, Xiahou Lian saw Shen Jue's carriage pass in the distance. Tassels and intricate carvings adorned the vehicle. Four fine horses pulled the carriage, and two squads of Eastern Depot agents followed behind—a grand and imposing sight. Twice, Xiahou Lian had seen Shen Jue himself while waiting for pig's feet at Chu Tower. Both times, he'd knelt with the others as Shen Jue passed, the golden embroidery along the hem of his robe shimmering magnificently as it brushed by. After Shen Jue had passed, Xiahou Lian pressed his forehead to the ground to sneak a glance at the depot chief's cold, distant figure as it faded into the distance.

Xiahou Lian understood that they were now strangers occupying two different worlds. He was a lowly brothel servant, as insignificant as dust, and Shen Jue was the powerful chief of the Eastern Depot, a eunuch of great influence. The memories of their days at the Xie residence and in the

palace seemed to belong to another lifetime, but those distant recollections still aroused indescribable emotions whenever they resurfaced in Xiahou Lian's mind.

The hot-tempered young master of the Xie family was gone; in his place was the enigmatic chief of the Eastern Depot, a man who controlled the fates of others with a flick of his hand. The depot relentlessly hunted Garden assassins, and none who fell into their hands survived. Wanted posters for Xiahou Lian were still everywhere—when the old ones faded, they were replaced with new ones, year after year. The chasm between him and Shen Jue was unsurpassable.

Without connections, Xiahou Lian couldn't obtain a map of Shen Jue's residence. He tried sneaking in on two separate occasions, but he got lost and left empty-handed both times. He still hadn't reclaimed Hengbo, and he was at a loss.

After finishing his flatbread and buns, Xiahou Lian buried the clivia petals in the soil. Suddenly, A-Chu burst from her room, her clothes disheveled and exposing an expanse of pale skin. She dashed to Xiahou Lian as though he was her savior, gasping for breath.

"Xiahou! I…I killed someone!"

Xiahou Lian was incredulous. "You? *Killed* someone?"

A-Chu looked embarrassed. "Well, he…he died in bed…" she stammered.

In other words, climaxing had killed him.

When Xiahou Lian didn't reply, A-Chu pulled him into the room, glancing around furtively. Only after confirming that the courtyard was empty did she slam the door again.

“How was I supposed to know that he’d be so frail in bed?” she said. “All I did was let him finish twice—he was still hopping around last night! Then, this morning, I found him lying there stiff as a board. I laughed at him for being so feeble, but then I pulled back the covers—it nearly scared me to death!”

Xiahou Lian drew back the bed curtain to reveal a man’s pale, lifeless face, black blood trickling from his slightly open mouth and eyes. Xiahou Lian recognized him—this was Yan Xiaobei, a low-ranking Eastern Depot agent. He had once been dirt poor, but somehow he’d come into enough money to boldly slap onto the madam’s desk and book A-Chu for a night.

A-Chu twisted her handkerchief nervously, stomping her foot in panic. “He’s an Eastern Depot officer, and he died in my bed! What am I supposed to do? The Eastern Depot—once you go in, you don’t come out again. How could someone as weak as me survive their torture?”

“You definitely wouldn’t,” Xiahou Lian agreed, nodding.

“Should I run away? I’ve saved up a little money, so I won’t starve. Xiahou, help me—get me out of the city!”

Xiahou Lian shook his head. “That won’t work. The Eastern Depot has spies everywhere—relay stations, hostels, stables, you name it. Unless you can flee Great Qi in one journey, you’ll never find peace.”

“So what do I do?” A-Chu pleaded helplessly.

Xiahou Lian thought for a moment. A-Chu had saved his life; he couldn’t just abandon her. He sighed. “Lend me some makeup.”

Before A-Chu could respond, a young maid’s soft voice spoke from outside the window. “A-Chu-jiejie, Officer Zhu is waiting in the front yard. He’s waiting for Officer Yan, so please wake him now.”

A-Chu leapt to her feet.

“Answer her,” Xiahou Lian mouthed.

“Yes, right away!” A-Chu called back through the window.

The maid’s footsteps receded as she hurried off. A-Chu wrung her hands. “It’s Zhu Shunzi! He’s a good friend of Yan Xiaobei’s. What should I do now?”

“Go out and stall him,” Xiahou Lian said. “Leave this to me.”

A-Chu nodded, taking a deep breath. She straightened her clothes and hair then walked out, head held high.

Zhu Shunzi had a sharp, rat-like face; there was hardly any flesh on his high cheekbones. His countenance was sly and conniving. All in all, Eastern Depot agents were really no more than hoodlums in official robes; they were always up to no good, darting around the capital and digging up scandals and secrets. Yunxian Tower was a favorite haunt of theirs. A-Chu was used to dealing with them, but today, the mere sight of Zhu Shunzi upset her. She sat in her armchair and waited, watching him pace back and forth until her head spun.

Her nerves were reaching their breaking point when a man strode through the flower gate.[25] He was tall and lean, with sharp cheekbones that lent him a gaunt look and a faint shadow of stubble around his lips. A-Chu froze in shock—it was none other than Yan Xiaobei! For a moment, she thought he’d come back from the dead.

“Well, Old Yan, you’re finally awake!” Zhu Shunzi exclaimed, throwing an arm around him. He turned to A-Chu and waved farewell. “We’ll head off now, Miss A-Chu!”

“Farewell and take care!” A-Chu replied, a stiff smile on her face.

Disguises and makeup were Xiahou Lian’s specialty; he’d mastered those arts under Qiu-shifu’s tutelage. With practiced calm, Xiahou Lian glanced at A-Chu before stepping out alongside Zhu Shunzi.

Zhu Shunzi was practically brimming with excitement. “Wei-gonggong has given us another mission, Old Yan! I just knew he’d see our worth! After sending us to assassinate that ungrateful bastard Shen Jue, he’s assigned us to Jiading!”

Assassinate Shen Jue? Xiahou Lian’s heart thumped, and his eyes jerked up.

“Who would’ve guessed that Shen Jue could actually fight?” Zhu Shunzi went on. “I always thought he was just some frail, pampered little thing who couldn’t even lift a blade. We’re lucky we got out when we did—if we’d stayed, it would’ve been the end for us. But Wei-gonggong is so generous. He didn’t blame us; in fact, he rewarded us with silver! Now he’s entrusting us with another important task. They say that a man will die for the one who recognizes his worth. Now that he favors us, we owe him our loyalty!”

Xiahou Lian responded with a simple grunt, masking his thoughts as he prodded Zhu Shunzi cautiously for more information. “What’s Shen Jue’s situation now? Is Wei-gonggong still sending people after him?”

“No—there’s no need! The emperor ordered Shen Jue to Nanjing to guard the imperial tombs. That’s the end of his story. A eunuch tomb guard doesn’t have much of a life—he won’t be able to stir anything up anymore!”

At least he’s alive, Xiahou Lian thought with relief.

Still, the news left a bitter taste in his mouth. Shen Jue had endured so much, laid the groundwork with such patience and determination, only to end up like this. Shen Jue wasn't like Xiahou Lian, who'd long since grown accustomed to rolling in the mud; Shen Jue was proud, and he'd reached the heights only to fall back down. Xiahou Lian couldn't help wondering how he was handling it.

Ah, the cruel tricks fate played.

Then again, Nanjing wasn't so bad. It was Shen Jue's hometown. He could spend his days there drinking tea, playing with cats, and feeding birds. That would be the rest of his life—a quiet end.

Xiahou Lian tilted his chin toward Zhu Shunzi. "So why did you come looking for me?"

"Oh, right! Forget Shen Jue—our luck has finally turned," he said enigmatically, pulling a letter from his lapels. "The emperor is on death's door, but he hasn't summoned the feudal lords. It's obvious he means to pass the throne to the second prince. Wei-gonggong's sending us to Jiading to escort the prince of Fu back to the capital in secret. This is our golden chance! When His Highness ascends the throne, we'll be his right-hand men!"

Chapter 56:
The Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard

AFTER A COUPLE GOOD HOURS of coaxing, Zhu Shunzi had spilled everything to Xiahou Lian.

Zhu Shunzi had first come to the capital as the young heir of a rural landlord, intending to take the imperial exams. After four or five years of attempts, however, he wasn't even close to being listed among those who'd passed.

With nothing better to do, he spent his time in teahouses, listening to storytellers who claimed that anyone who joined the Eastern Depot could become a high-ranking official within two years. They said that people even cleared the way for Eastern Depot officials during grand processions. Determined, Zhu Shunzi signed up and became one of the Eastern Depot's despised eunuchs. As it turned out, he'd been misled. After a year and a half, there was no sign of a promotion; he languished in his lowly position, barely better than a street thug.

In his quest for success, Zhu Shunzi spent a fortune to get close to Wei De, hoping to impress him with the same petty cunning he'd used when stealing corn and catching loaches as a boy. Coincidentally, when Zhu Shunzi managed this, Yan Xiaobei was there as well. Yan Xiaobei was a clerk in the Eastern Depot's Hare Division, and his family ran an herb shop. Zhu Shunzi belonged to the depot's Ox Division, so while he and Yan Xiaobei had crossed paths before, they'd never spoken much. All Zhu Shunzi knew was that Yan Xiaobei was regarded as an exceptional

swordsman, and that his practice matches on the training grounds always drew thunderous applause.

That day at the depot headquarters, Zhu Shunzi and Yan Xiaobei knelt before Wei De, begging for additional responsibilities. Wei De had lifted his eyelids, brushed tea foam from the lid of his cup, and said, “Do you know what Shen Jue looks like? Good. Go and bring me his head.”

They didn’t manage to bring back Shen Jue’s head, and they’d nearly lost their own while trying. Even now, Zhu Shunzi shuddered at the memory of their assassination attempt. He kept brooding over the unpredictability of Shen Jue’s swordplay. Not only was Zhu Shunzi no match for Shen Jue, even Yan Xiaobei hadn’t lasted more than five moves against him. The two had fled in panic; fortunately, Shen Jue’s servants weren’t there, so he hadn’t pursued his attackers.

Shen Jue was a genius at the blade—Xiahou Lian had known that since childhood. He didn’t say anything more to Zhu Shunzi, and the two parted at Yunxian Tower.

Zhu Shunzi went home to pack his belongings, while Xiahou Lian took the opportunity to help A-Chu dispose of Yan Xiaobei’s body. After that, he caught up with Zhu Shunzi at the city gate, and they rode swiftly along the official road to Jiading. They set off at dawn, passed three relay stations, and changed horses three times, reaching the Shili Village post station by nightfall.

It was just a rural post station, not very large, consisting of a main hall and back hall, five side rooms, and ten stables in the rear. In the pitch-black night, the only sources of light were the faintly glowing red lanterns hanging at the red gate. They’d traveled a dozen or so meters more before

they could make out any other houses. Inside the station hall were a couple of glossy, black lacquered tables. Atop one sat a small oil lamp; tiny insects flew mindlessly into its flame, burning to ash. It looked like they were the only officials staying at the station. They ate, then each retired to a separate room; both were exhausted from riding all day, and Zhu Shunzi was already struggling to stay awake.

But Xiahou Lian couldn’t sleep. He lit a lamp and repeatedly examined the letter Wei De had trusted them to deliver to the prince of Fu. For the sake of secrecy, the envelope bore no name and was sealed with wax. It was light as a feather in Xiahou Lian’s hand; there was probably just a single sheet of paper inside.

Something felt off.

The prince of Fu, the eldest of the princes, was said to be overweight, with an impaired leg. His title had been conferred ages ago, but he’d long delayed his move to his designated fiefdom. Only after the criticism of the entire court became unbearable did he finally bid farewell to the emperor and empress and reluctantly depart for his domain. Meanwhile, the second prince, a mere ten-year-old, was still running barefoot around the palace. With the emperor on his deathbed, Wei De likely wanted to seize the chance to return the prince of Fu to the capital. That said, the notion that he’d send two puny, vulnerable ants on such an important mission was rather ridiculous. He surely would’ve dispatched a ranked official at least.

Pondering the situation beneath the lamplight, Xiahou Lian decided to split off the next day and head to Nanjing to find Shen Jue.

A fierce wind blew outside, pushing the window open. The relay station stood high on a hill, overlooking forested slopes where trees swayed

and surged like waves in the gusts. Leaves skipped across the hillside, rustling loudly. The pale-yellow moon was half hidden behind heavy clouds and soon disappeared from sight. Xiahou Lian leaned his forehead against the window lattice and stared into the pitch-black night. It had been years since he last saw Shen Jue, and he knew their old bond had dissolved long ago. Although once inseparable, they were now sworn enemies. A storm of emotions churned inside Xiahou Lian as he wondered how he would face Shen Jue when he arrived in Jinling.

Forget it, he thought. *Worrying about it won't help, anyway.* With that, he went to bed.

In a drowsy haze, he heard a commotion downstairs—men's occasional shouts and the clanking of armor, as well as the sound of the wooden stairs outside creaking underfoot.

Then footsteps stopped just outside his door, and—with a loud bang—someone kicked it open. A whip cracked through the air with a sharp snap, slicing forcefully toward Xiahou Lian. He jolted in shock, trying to scramble from the bed, but he wasn't fast enough to dodge—the whip lashed his back, producing searing, stinging pain. He tumbled to the floor and tried to roll away, but the whip chased him relentlessly, audibly snapping; it seemed almost alive. Xiahou Lian grabbed a stool and used it to block the next strike; the whip hit the stool so hard it stripped off a layer of lacquer. Seizing his moment while the whip recoiled, Xiahou Lian swung the stool with all his strength against his attacker's temple. Then, not wasting a second, Xiahou Lian picked up another small stool and used it to pin the man against the wall.

The glint of blades flashed behind him. Xiahou Lian turned his head to see a group of Embroidered Uniform Guards draw their sabers and point

their blades straight at him. The flying fish embroidered on their dark uniforms gleamed so vividly they were almost grotesque.

Xiahou Lian furrowed his brow. Had Yan Xiaobei's actions been exposed? Was the Embroidered Uniform Guard there to arrest him?

"Let go," growled the man with the whip, nodding toward the stool pinning him to the wall. He wiped his forehead and hissed sharply through his teeth, "How dare you hit your senior? You must not want to live."

Zhu Shunzi rushed in from outside, his robe still disheveled. "It's a misunderstanding! Just a misunderstanding! Oh, no—why are you fighting?" Zhu Shunzi pulled Xiahou Lian aside, took out a handkerchief, and pressed it against the injured man's forehead. "I understand that my brother here has offended Commander Gao with his actions, but I beg you, sir, please have mercy and let it slide this time! Look at my brother here—he didn't know any better!"

Commander Gao glared at Xiahou Lian with clear malice. "Who are you? Give me your name. I'd like to know who the hell has the nerve to hit their own superior."

"And who are you?" Xiahou Lian asked, raising an eyebrow. "My venerable self was sound asleep when you barged in, swinging your whip without any cause. What's your problem?" He scanned the room, which was crowded with members of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. "Bullying me just because you've got more people?"

Zhu Shunzi jabbed Xiahou Lian, frantically signaling him with his eyes.

Commander Gao held up his badge. "I am Gao Sheng, squad commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. The magistrate of the

Southern Surveillance Bureau is my godfather, and Wei-gonggong is my god-grandfather. And just who the hell are you to spout such nonsense at me?"

"No, no!" Zhu Shunzi hurried to appease him, smiling nervously. "He's just a bit slow. He doesn't think things through—please don't take offense!"

In the current empire, civil and military officials alike scrambled to curry favor with Wei De. Those who couldn't worm their way into becoming his godsons settled for becoming his godsons' godsons, thus happily taking on the role of his god-grandsons. In just a few years, Wei De's "filial godsons" and "virtuous god-grandsons" had multiplied across the land, creating an unusual sight: three generations of such a family all beneath one roof.

He's just a lapdog, Xiahou Lian grumbled internally.

"We're with the Eastern Depot, and we're carrying out *Wei-gonggong's* orders," Xiahou Lian said, deliberately emphasizing "Wei-gonggong" for effect as he tossed Yan Xiaobei's badge onto the table.

Sure enough, Gao Sheng hesitated. He glanced at the Eastern Depot badge and clenched his jaw in frustration.

"You see, Commander Gao, we're all on the same side!" Zhu Shunzi said, wearing a fawning smile. "Why make things difficult for each other? Now that everything's out in the open, there's no problem—no problem at all!"

Gao Sheng shoved Zhu Shunzi aside and sneered coldly at Xiahou Lian. "You stole my room, but fine. Since you're working for my god-grandfather, I'll let it slide."

“*Your* room?” Xiahou Lian retorted with a smile. “Does it have your name written on it?”

“This is the only premium room in the Shili Village relay station. You think someone like you has the right to sleep here?” Gao Sheng stepped aside and continued. “Forget it. I won’t argue about this anymore. My brothers and I have been traveling all day, and the station is small and fully occupied. It’s a shame, but there’s no room for you two. You’ll have to find somewhere else to sleep—perhaps the forest will do!”

“Fine, fine!” Zhu Shunzi said, tugging on Xiahou Lian’s sleeve. “It’s just a matter of relocating ourselves, isn’t it?”

For a long moment, Xiahou Lian stood where he was, silent and unmoving. The Embroidered Uniform Guard’s members stood with their arms crossed, watching the two men with scornful expressions.

Gao Sheng walked past Xiahou Lian, deliberately bumping his shoulder as he sneered in a low voice, “You’re just a pair of stray dogs—you two can hole up anywhere.”

Xiahou Lian raised his eyes to look back at Gao Sheng, his dark gaze unsettling in its intensity.

Zhu Shunzi grabbed his hand. “Calm down, Old Yan!” he whispered. “Calm down! We can’t cause trouble here!”

Xiahou Lian stood there silently for one more moment before turning to take his clothes and bag from the rosewood rack and his goose-quill saber from the wall. He pushed past the Embroidered Uniform Guard and walked out. Zhu Shunzi hurried to his own room to grab his bundle, then chased after him, calling out, “Slow down! Old Yan, slow down! Wait for me!”

They fetched their horses and left the relay station, trotting along the main road. Zhu Shunzi sighed. “Rank means everything—even a difference of one level is staggering. Besides, he was Wei-gonggong’s god-grandson. Let’s just shrug it off, all right?”

Xiahou Lian understood; that was why he’d swallowed his anger. The world was what it was. In these recent chaotic years, he’d been the lowest of vagrants, enduring endless scornful glances, and he’d borne them. After all, he was no longer the reckless assassin he once was; now, he avoided drawing blood whenever he could.

Tilting his head back to look up at the night sky, he said nothing.

“I once thought about finding myself a godfather or great-godfather too,” said Zhu Shunzi.

Xiahou Lian glanced sideways at him. “Why didn’t you?”

“Back when Shen Jue was still in power, I tried sucking up to him, but I guess his standards were too high. He kept his distance—in fact, he completely ignored me!” Zhu Shunzi punctuated his words with an exaggerated toss of his head. “But Wei-gonggong has a sharper eye for talent. I’m lucky Shen Jue didn’t take me in—if he had, I’d probably be suffering alongside him today.”

Stunned by the sheer shamelessness within the Eastern Depot, Xiahou Lian said nothing more. The pair rode slowly along, eyes peeled for another place to stay the night.

Suddenly, light flared behind them, a hubbub echoing faintly in the distance. Xiahou Lian turned his head to see flames bursting from the direction of the relay station, lighting half the sky. Zhu Shunzi froze in

shock, but Xiahou Lian tensed, vigilant, and ordered, “Into the forest, quickly!”

They urged their horses into the woods. Xiahou Lian dismounted and climbed a tree, shielding his eyes as he peered toward the post station. In the flickering firelight, he saw black-clad assassins with white masks moving swiftly in the chaos. The flames cast a bloodred glow on the masks, making the assassins look like demons bathed in blood and fire. The post station’s attendants fled, screaming, only to be caught and have their throats slit. The Embroidered Uniform Guard fought back, but they were no match for the assassins; they fell one by one into the flames, which consumed their garments and bodies.

Zhu Shunzi trembled in fear. “G-Garden assassins!” he stammered.

“No—they’re not using the Garden’s saber arts,” Xiahou Lian said, frowning.

“How do you know?” Zhu Shunzi asked in surprise.

Xiahou Lian didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled the envelope from his pocket and tore it open.

Zhu Shunzi panicked, trying to stop him. “Have you lost your mind?!”

Dodging Zhu Shunzi’s hands, Xiahou Lian shook out the letter. Zhu Shunzi was dumbfounded—it was completely blank.

He snatched the letter and scrutinized it. “Did you grab the wrong one?”

Xiahou Lian just looked at him silently.

“This can’t be! Why would it be blank? Wait… I know! It must be in invisible ink!” Zhu Shunzi declared confidently. “I’ve heard that you need to pour water on that to reveal the writing.” After a moment of hesitation, he undid his belt and urinated on the paper. A minute later, the paper was soaked and falling apart—but still blank.

“What is going on?” Zhu Shunzi wailed.

“What else could it be? We were tricked!” Xiahou Lian said, pinching his nose shut. Judging by the reek of his urine, Zhu Shunzi must have some kind of infection. “That old bastard Wei De never intended us to escort the prince of Fu to the capital. We’re just decoys, meant to draw attention while someone else secretly meets the prince.”

“You mean those assassins were after *us*?”

Xiahou Lian nodded. “Luck was on our side. If the Embroidered Uniform Guard hadn’t chased us away, we’d be dead right now.”

Zhu Shunzi was shaken. Xiahou Lian slid down the tree he’d climbed and remounted his horse. “Quick—before the assassins figure things out. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To Jinling!” Xiahou Lian said, spurring his horse forward, his black clothes blending into the night.

They rode south. The scorching summer sun left them dizzy and exhausted, but still they pressed on. They didn’t dare stay at any more post stations, so they slept in the woods each night, and were bitten half to death by mosquitoes. They rode throughout the day, bushes scratching at their ankles. The foliage was deep green, almost dripping with color, and the sky

was a pale duck-egg blue; its thin clouds looked like embroidery on a blue robe.

Zhu Shunzi, miserable, sighed constantly. No wonder—his once-in-a-lifetime benefactor, Wei De, had essentially sacrificed him. Zhu Shunzi's dreams of promotions and wealth had evaporated, and now he was struggling just to survive.

Xiahou Lian, on the other hand, seemed unfazed, as if this misfortune hadn't affected him at all. Zhu Shunzi stole glances at him, sensing that "Old Yan" was different from before. The previous Yan Xiaobei had been quiet, but only because he didn't have much to say. Now, his silence had a cold edge, and when he smiled, it was tinged with deep, unspoken sorrow. Zhu Shunzi supposed that something must've happened in his family—maybe the death of his wife, or of one of his parents.

"Hey, Old Yan. How did you know those assassins weren't from the Garden?" Zhu Shunzi asked, making conversation.

"I saw real assassins a few times, back when I was wandering the jianghu," Xiahou Lian replied vaguely.

"Oh." Zhu Shunzi rode alongside him. "The Garden's been lying low for the past few years. The *Garden Ghost Registry* stopped after the Wuminggui. It's a shame; I was really getting into it. Did you ever meet the Wuminggui?"

Xiahou Lian shook his head.

Zhu Shunzi was about to ask more when the sound of hoofbeats reached them from afar. A group of riders emerged from a cloud of dust. Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi reined in their horses and watched from a distance.

The riders were extremely formidable men, their black robes clinging tightly to their muscular frames. Each looked like a sheathed blade ready to be drawn, its sharp, unstoppable edge prepared to be unleashed.

Xiahou Lian frowned. “Eastern Depot agents?”

Zhu Shunzi’s eyes lit up. Before Xiahou Lian could react, he spurred his horse down the hill, shouting, “Wait! *Wait!*”

These Eastern Depot agents on the official road could be the real escort team Wei De had sent to the prince of Fu. Even if they weren’t, traveling alongside them would make the decoy team harder for the assassins to track down again.

For once, Zhu Shunzi’s slow mind had worked quickly. He’d charged down the hill like an arrow without any explanation to Xiahou Lian, leaving his companion reaching out after him in vain. Xiahou Lian hesitated for a moment, then followed, unwilling to abandon the reckless fool.

The group of riders heard the shouting and stopped. Zhu Shunzi rode up and, clasping his hands excitedly, gushed, “Thank you for waiting for us, Your Excellencies. We are—”

Xiahou Lian caught up and interrupted. “We’re members of the Embroidered Uniform Guard rushing to Jiading on official business. My humble self is Squad Commander Gao Sheng, and this is Deputy Zhu. Here is my badge.” Xiahou Lian handed over a badge, which one of the agents examined and returned.

As Xiahou Lian tucked the badge back into his pocket, Zhu Shunzi stared in shock. When had his companion taken that from Gao Sheng? Still, he caught on quickly and added, “Right, right! Just yesterday, my colleague and I encountered bandits on the road and nearly lost our lives. How

fortunate to run into fellow officers now! Might we travel together for a stretch? It will be safer for all of us.”

The agents were silent, their expressions opaque as they scrutinized the two men. Zhu Shunzi continued to smile obliviously, but Xiahou Lian was on edge.

He really wanted to smack Zhu Shunzi’s thick skull. These obviously weren’t ordinary agents; they were nothing like the bumbling fool beside him. Their scabbards and clothes were stained with dried blood, evidence of dark deeds.

Were they Wei De’s men? Or—

Suddenly, the agents parted, and a man rode out from the group. His face was chiseled like stone, every line hard and cold. He frowned, looking utterly indifferent.

“No. Turn back,” the man said icily, leaving no room for argument.

Zhu Shunzi’s face fell. He opened his mouth to plead, but Xiahou Lian stopped him with a look, signaling that it was time to leave. Zhu Shunzi hesitated, still hoping to convince the riders, when a cool, clear voice emerged from the group, low and flowing like a hidden spring.

“Don’t be rude, Situ. If they’re friends from the Embroidered Uniform Guard, we should help them.”

Xiahou Lian turned, his gaze piercing the crowd to land on the figure at the back.

The man who’d spoken was turned away, but even in the same black robes the others wore, he carried himself with a loftiness that set him apart. It wasn’t just strength or elegance—it was an indescribable arrogance. The

man turned slightly, revealing the brushstroke-like upward curve of his eyes. His gaze was cold, betraying a subtle, detached apathy.

“We’re also heading to Jiading,” he said. “If you like, we can travel together for a while.”

Chapter 57:
The Frightening Waves Rise Again

XIAHOU LIAN STARED BLANKLY at Shen Jue. For a moment, he forgot to speak.

Never in his wildest dreams had he expected to meet Shen Jue on the road, but after initially hanging in suspense, his heart now slowly settled back into place.

The brat is alive and well. That's good.

Shen Jue turned his horse around and met Xiahou Lian's gaze. From across the crowd of riders, Shen Jue's eyes were cold and unfamiliar. Feeling as if he'd been scorched by a flame, Xiahou Lian quickly averted his gaze, nudging his horse to fall back.

Zhu Shunzi was petrified. "W-we wouldn't want to impose!" he stammered. "It was my mistake. I'm truly sorry!" He shot Xiahou Lian a frantic look that screamed, *"Let's go! Now!"*

"Why spurn us?" Shen Jue asked, bowing slightly from his saddle, a faint smile on his lips. "Meeting like this is fate. The roads have indeed been unsafe lately—so many bandits. Traveling together will be safer for all of us. I am Xie Jinglan; I currently serve as one of the Eastern Depot's local supervisors. You may address me as Superintendent Xie."

Hearing those three syllables—Xie Jinglan—Xiahou Lian felt his heart seize. He tightened his grip on the reins.

Zhu Shunzi's legs trembled uncontrollably. "Th-this…" he stuttered, casting another glance at Xiahou Lian.

“In that case, we respectfully accept your offer,” Xiahou Lian said. He clasped his hands together, forcing a courteous smile.

Zhu Shunzi glared at him, but Xiahou Lian ignored it, urging his horse forward to follow the agents. Zhu Shunzi reluctantly trailed behind them. They rode swiftly, the agents moving in eerie silence like a soundless yet unstoppable tide. Pounding hooves sent up dust clouds, and from afar, the riders resembled black arrows cutting through the wind. At their forefront was Shen Jue, the arrow’s bared tip, cold and unyielding.

They rode for an entire day, stopping only at nightfall to set up camp. Zhu Shunzi was so exhausted he wanted to collapse where he was, but he forced himself to stay alert, seizing the chance to huddle close to Xiahou Lian and discuss their next move.

“Old Yan, what do we do now?” Zhu Shunzi groaned, his head pounding. “We were masked during our assassination attempt, so Shen Jue hasn’t recognized us, but still—we’ve walked right into the lion’s den! How do we get out of this alive?” A moment later, he muttered to himself, “We’re doomed. And what does it mean that my right eyelid won’t stop twitching? Is that good luck or bad luck?”

The sky was overcast, and rain soon blew in on a cool wind, leaving dark, coin-sized spots on the ground. The agents busied themselves setting up tents, barriers, and fires for cooking. Zhu Shunzi buzzed constantly in Xiahou Lian’s ear, but Xiahou Lian’s attention was fixed on Shen Jue, who had stepped away from the group and stood alone on a small hill dozens of yards away.

Although he was too distant to see clearly, Xiahou Lian could make out Shen Jue’s dark silhouette, solitary and forlorn.

Zhu Shunzi tugged his sleeve. “Hey, Old Yan, are you even listening?”

Xiahou Lian turned. “They’re clearly on a secret mission. Now that we’ve seen them, they won’t just let us go. We’re lucky they haven’t killed us already.”

“Then what do we do? Maybe we can slip away, find a relay station, and send word to Wei-gonggong—”

“Enough,” Xiahou Lian cut him off. “Stay put. Don’t cause any trouble or I’ll beat you to a pulp myself!” He rose and approached one of the agents. “Your supervisor is out in the rain. Aren’t you going to take him an umbrella?”

The agent shook his head. “He forbade us to approach him when he’s alone.”

Xiahou Lian frowned. “So you’re just going to leave him out there? His health is frail. What if he gets sick?”

The agent gave him a strange look, as if Xiahou Lian were meddling in something that wasn’t his business. Xiahou Lian glanced around, then grabbed an oilpaper umbrella he’d spotted among someone’s belongings.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the umbrella’s owner protested.

Ignoring the objections, Xiahou Lian walked toward Shen Jue. Reaching him, he opened the umbrella. The vast twilit world around them was enveloped in light drizzle, but the umbrella created a small, sheltered space. Xiahou Lian tilted it toward Shen Jue, shielding him completely and leaving himself exposed. Raindrops gathered on the umbrella’s surface, streaming over its edges like beads off a broken string and pattering onto

Xiahou Lian’s shoulders. Shen Jue was clearly surprised. He paused, and his lips curved into a faint smile.

“Thank you.”

His complexion was poor, pale as paper. A red scratch marred his right cheek, although it was thin enough to go unnoticed from a distance. *The guy must've gotten into a fight and had his face scratched. At least it's not too serious—it probably won't leave a scar*.

Memories overwhelmed Xiahou Lian like a cloud of smoke. He recalled the frail but prideful young master Shen Jue had once been. Now, he'd grown tall, standing straight-backed and composed, but traces of his old self still lingered. Xiahou Lian couldn't help but wonder, *If I'm no longer a Qiye Garden assassin, and if Shen Jue is no longer chief of the Eastern Depot, couldn't we reconcile? Couldn't we go back to how we were in our youth?*

But the thought made him laugh bitterly at himself. After all, they'd become strangers walking two separate roads. What was the point of dredging up old memories? Shoving the umbrella into Shen Jue's hand, Xiahou Lian turned to leave.

"Commander Gao," Shen Jue called out suddenly, "Since there's nothing better to do, why don't we chat?" He'd lived in the capital so long that his words carried its distinctive accent.

Taken aback, Xiahou Lian paused for a moment before saying, "All right." He took the umbrella back from Shen Jue, then held it over him again.

Though Shen Jue had mentioned chatting, neither he nor Xiahou Lian spoke. It was as if both were waiting, testing the other's patience. The only sound was the soft patter of the rain on the wind that chilled their faces.

Eventually, the silence grew too heavy for Xiahou Lian. He glanced around restlessly before noticing a string of deep-red prayer beads hanging

from Shen Jue's wrist. Unable to hold back, he broke the silence. "Do you practice Buddhism, Superintendent?"

Shen Jue lifted his wrist and looked down at the beads—smooth, glossy red orbs strung together, a tourmaline Buddha head fixed to one bead. Lashes lowered, he replied, "I did for a while. I had the beads blessed, drew divination sticks at a temple, even requested a longevity plaque.[26] I tried every ritual the temples offered. But what's the point? Heaven doesn't hear our prayers, and the gods don't notice our devotion. The things we cannot attain ourselves remain unattainable."

"Maybe the time just hasn't come yet," Xiahou Lian replied. "You mentioned paying for a longevity plaque on someone's behalf—do you wear those beads for the same person's sake?"

"Yes—for someone I once knew," Shen Jue said softly. The wind swept past, cool and biting, its faint chill settling into his expression. "I went to the capital's most revered temple, prayed for their safety, wished them a long life…but they died anyway."

Xiahou Lian was no stranger to death; over the past decade, it had followed him like a shadow. He still couldn't regard it with complete indifference, but he had learned to face it calmly. Seeing how deeply the memory of Shen Jue's "old acquaintance" haunted him, Xiahou Lian assumed he was speaking of a lover from his days at the palace. Deliberating for a moment, Xiahou Lian chose his words carefully and said, "Life's limits are ultimately unsurpassable—when it's our time to go, we must. Whoever you lost, she's up there in the heavens, and I'm sure she wouldn't want you to be sad. Try to find peace, Superintendent."

Shen Jue shuddered at his words. He spoke slowly, his tone icy. “An ultimate, unsurpassable limit—how fitting. In that case, these star-and-moon bodhi beads are useless junk. I might as well throw them away.” He slid the prayer beads from his wrist and flung them into the rain. They landed on the slope below and lost their luster as the mud and rain splattered them.

Xiahou Lian frowned. “Why would you throw them away?” He thrust the umbrella handle into Shen Jue’s hand, ducked out from beneath its cover, and descended the slope to retrieve the beads. Carefully, he wiped the dirt off them with his sleeve and held them out to Shen Jue.

Standing on the slope in the rain, his hair soaked and sticking to his face, Xiahou Lian looked up at Shen Jue, who stood holding the umbrella and gazing down at him.

“Keep them,” Xiahou Lian urged. “You’ve used them for so long—they can at least be a keepsake. Or, who knows—maybe you’ll meet that person you mentioned in the underworld.”

Shen Jue let out a mocking laugh. “The *underworld*?”

“Or the next life.”

“Next life?” Shen Jue repeated. “I don’t care about the next life. Only this one.”

He handed the umbrella back to Xiahou Lian and walked back toward camp, hands clasped behind his back. Smoke was already rising from the campfires, and Zhu Shunzi waved at Xiahou Lian. One of Xiahou Lian’s shoulders was soaked, but he didn’t mind. He lowered his head and looked at the prayer beads—still glossy red, they gleamed like gemstones

even in the rain. He tucked them carefully into his coat and headed back to the camp.

The group finished their evening meal and rested for an hour, then resumed their journey. Seeing that they intended to travel through the night, Zhu Shunzi mustered the courage to feign illness, loudly demanding a break and suggesting that they go on without him. Shen Jue's officers would have none of it—they picked Zhu Shunzi up and shoved him onto a horse. One even rested a hand on his sword hilt, his gaze unmistakably threatening. Zhu Shunzi had no choice but to continue with them, thoroughly deflated.

Night unfurled like a scroll, dark and heavy. They avoided the main roads, taking forest trails instead. Overlapping leaves formed layers of shifting shadows, rustling in the wind like a chorus of whispers. Hooves splashed through muddy puddles, flinging up specks of mud. After a half hour of travel, the rain suddenly intensified, as if the heavens had cracked open. Torrents of droplets fell like arrows, piercing the earth. Thunder roared and lightning raged as fiercely as dragons and serpents, the blinding flashes lighting up the forest as if it were daytime. At those moments, the officers' dark silhouettes became visible; they were draped in rain capes, their expressions stern.

Over the storm's roar, a man named Situ Jin shouted, "Split into three groups and surround Hengtang Inn! If anyone steps out of the inn, kill them on sight!"

"Yes, sir!" the agents roared in response.

The formation shifted rapidly as the cavalry split into three distinct groups riding forward in tandem. Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi found themselves boxed into the middle, unable to advance or retreat. A chill ran

down Xiahou Lian's spine as a realization dawned on him—these officers weren't headed to Jiading. They were racing onward to conduct a raid! Could the forces loyal to Wei De be inside Hengtang Inn?

Zhu Shunzi looked at Xiahou Lian in panic, but there was nothing Xiahou Lian could do—intentionally or not, the officers had hemmed the pair in, leaving them no escape. Their only option was to move with the crowd.

When they arrived in Hengtang Town, everyone reined their horses in across the road from the inn. Shen Jue's officers shed their rain capes and quickly changed into black clothing, hiding their faces behind porcelain-white masks. Xiahou Lian's eyes widened in horror—these officers were the assassins from the Shili Village relay station!

The officers dismounted, their goose-quill sabers glinting under the street lanterns' red glow. The blades were long and slender, their intricately engraved, gilded hilts both elegant and menacing. At Situ Jin's signal, the officers silently scattered into the narrow alleys surrounding the inn. The rain drowned out their footsteps as they moved through the darkness like silent phantoms.

Watchmen stood guard at the inn's front and back doors. A few of Shen Jue's officers climbed onto rooftops opposite the inn and nocked arrows to their bows. With a whistle, arrows shot through the rain. In the next instant, the watchmen fell dead. Simultaneously, two squads of officers slipped ghostlike through the inn doors. Time ticked by slowly, and then the sound of chaos erupted within the inn, accompanied by flickering firelight and faint wails that carried through the rain. Suddenly, the inn's main door burst open, and a man bolted out in panic—only for an officer to grab him and immediately drag him back inside.

Xiahou Lian grimaced, his eyes fixed on the tall, unmoving figure ahead of him. Shen Jue stood silently, his back straight and resolute. Gradually, the disturbance inside the inn died down.

Shen Jue turned to look at Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi, then suddenly gave Xiahou Lian a chilling smile. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you about Yan Xiaobei—I was the one who had him killed.”

Xiahou Lian’s pupils contracted sharply, cold dread racing down his spine as if frost were forming on his very bones.

Situ Jin, who’d been quiet until now, addressed Shen Jue. “And this Deputy Zhu must be Zhu Shunzi, the officer, right?”

“What…what’re you talking about? I…I don’t understand, Old Yan!” Zhu Shunzi stammered in terror, looking back and forth between Situ Jin and Xiahou Lian.

“When you and Yan Xiaobei escaped the supervisor’s residence, we were already watching you,” Situ Jin explained. “So we know who you are. You’re amateurs—you shouldn’t have returned home right after the assassination attempt, and you should’ve checked to make sure you weren’t being followed.”

“Then Old Yan…Old Yan was killed…? What does that mean…?” Zhu Shunzi asked, trembling.

“Originally, you were just ants—unworthy of my attention,” Shen Jue said coldly, his gaze sweeping over them. “But Yan Xiaobei injured my face. That’s unforgivable—even if it was a minor wound.”

Momentarily forgetting his own peril, Zhu Shunzi stared at Xiahou Lian, thunderstruck. “So…so…”

“So…” Shen Jue turned to Xiahou Lian. “Who are you really? Considering how masterful your disguise is…” Shen Jue’s expression flickered. It was as if his icy mask was starting to melt, revealing another face beneath. Staring intently at Xiahou Lian, he asked, “Xiahou Lian—is that you?”

Chapter 58:
Reaper on a Rainy Night

"SO, YOU'RE NO LONGER the chief of the Eastern Depot, yet you still refuse to let Xiahou Lian go?" Xiahou Lian asked, gaze lowered.

Shen Jue didn't answer his question, but instead pressed, "Who exactly are you?"

"Just Shang-erlang, a humble servant from Yunxian Tower," Xiahou Lian replied. "You may have killed Yan Xiaobei, but he died in our courtesan A-Chu's bed. A-Chu has always been kind to me, and I couldn't stand by and do nothing. So I disguised myself as Yan Xiaobei."

Shen Jue raised his hand slightly, gesturing to his officers. "We'll know whether you're Shang-erlang or not once we tear your mask off."

Two officers immediately stepped forward, and Xiahou Lian dismounted his horse, standing still as they flanked him. They probed his jaw and hairline for the seam of a mask, to no avail, then began poking and prodding at his face. No matter how long they searched, they found nothing. The officers exchanged baffled looks, but then one caught a faint scent wafting lightly from Xiahou Lian on the rain. The officer's eyes lit up with understanding.

"He's not wearing a mask—it's makeup!" He swiped his hand across Xiahou Lian's face, then brought it to his nose to sniff. "It's Tianxiang Pavilion's powder. My wife uses it, too. Their formula is unique; water doesn't wash it off. You need an oil-soaked cloth to remove it."

“Then we need to go into the inn,” the other officer said. “They should have some tea oil.”

Xiahou Lian stood quietly, his hands at his sides. Shen Jue regarded him for a while and said, “You seem rather calm.”

“That’s because I’m not,” Xiahou Lian replied.

Shen Jue said nothing. The heavy downpour battered the leaves of the old locust tree, producing a loud crackle. The narrow alley was pitch black, every face a blurred shadow in the darkness. Xiahou Lian tilted his head to look up at Shen Jue on his horse, but he couldn’t discern his expression—only that Shen Jue was staring in his direction. For some reason, Xiahou Lian sensed deep sorrow in his gaze.

As the screams from the inn gradually faded, Xiahou Lian followed Shen Jue and the others through the main gate. Beyond the spirit screen, the blue bricks on the ground were stained with dark-red blood; it mixed with the rainwater and flowed into the gutters, the rain soon rinsing it away. Shen Jue’s officers were disposing of the bodies, digging a large pit and tossing them in one by one, whether they’d been identified or not. The corpses piled up in the pit, head against feet, feet against head, their faces frozen in terrified expressions, twisted into grotesque masks.

The men had already cleared the inn’s main hall, pushing the tables and chairs aside. They’d left only a single high-backed chair in the center of the room next to a black-lacquered tea table. Two men dressed in bright-yellow flying fish robes knelt on the ground. Their hats were gone, their hairnets askew, and their faces trembled uncontrollably. Shivering, they huddled together like birds frozen in a frosty wind. The innkeeper cowered with his wife and children in a corner by the western wall. A wooden shelf

jutted out above them, holding a gilded clay statue of the God of Wealth. The innkeeper and his family were acting like the statue was that of a Bodhisattva, chanting “Amitabha”[27] and bowing repeatedly.

Shen Jue sat in the central chair, the hem of his robe fanning out like a peacock’s tail, the silver and gold embroidery over his lap shimmering. The two kneeling men shivered even harder at the sight of him, but Shen Jue ignored them. Instead, he pointed at Xiahou Lian and said, “Bring a basin of oil and clean his face.”

His officers brought tea oil from the kitchen along with towels and a comb. Calmly, Xiahou Lian removed his makeup, wiping his face clean. He even asked for a basin of water afterward to rinse his face thoroughly.

Zhu Shunzi was astonished. He’d never been part of the criminal underworld and had only heard of such masterful disguises in stories. Now that he was seeing one with his own eyes, his jaw dropped so far he could’ve fit an egg inside it.

When Xiahou Lian finished removing his makeup, he looked at Shen Jue with composure.

Shen Jue stood and walked over. He was so tall that his shadow fell over Xiahou Lian, who still knelt on the ground. Instinctively, Xiahou Lian leaned backward a little. Shen Jue reached out, his fingers searching Xiahou Lian’s face as if he was unwilling to give up, determined to find the seam of a mask and tear it away to reveal the truth. But there was nothing.

Shen Jue’s heart went cold. He felt ridiculous. Three years had passed since the last Ghost Festival, and he’d sworn to stop thinking about this. Yet here he was, clinging to the faintest sliver of hope. Having encountered someone so skilled at disguise, he couldn’t help thinking that there might be

a chance. He had needed to grab that chance, refusing to release it, tearing into the truth bit by bit, even if every revelation made his heart bleed. Only when it was raw and exposed would he finally stop.

It wasn't the darkness of a lifetime in the abyss that broke a person—it was a fleeting glimpse of light, the hope of reaching it, and an eventual fall back into the depths that shattered someone completely.

Shen Jue withdrew his hand and turned his back. "Get out," he said hoarsely.

Xiahou Lian froze for a moment, then realized that Shen Jue was addressing him. He rose from the ground and walked out. Shen Jue's officers stopped him outside, directing him to stand beneath the covered walkway with Zhu Shunzi.

Zhu Shunzi reached out and rubbed Xiahou Lian's face, curious, then gave him a thumbs-up. "Impressive. Even my sharp eyes couldn't see through your disguise. Your skills are remarkable."

Xiahou Lian was in a foul mood and only grunted half-heartedly in reply.

The two men squatted under the eaves and faced the courtyard where officers clad in rain capes dug pits to bury the dead.

Zhu Shunzi heaved a sigh. "Poor Yan Xiaobei. So young, yet his life's already over," he lamented. "At this rate, I'm not far behind, either. When I see him again, I won't even know what to say. We'll just sit there in silence with tears streaming down our faces."

Xiahou Lian thought about Yan Xiaobei. In retrospect, the guy's face had been mottled, blood seeping from his mouth and eyes—clear signs of poisoning, likely arsenic or aconite. He'd been so rushed in that moment

that he'd failed to examine the body, simply accepting that A-Chu had killed him by accident. Xiahou Lian patted Zhu Shunzi's shoulder, consoling him.

"It's all my own doing," Zhu Shunzi muttered dejectedly, sighing again. "I had a perfectly good chance at the imperial exams—but no, I just had to join the Eastern Depot. Even that wasn't enough—I had to go stick my neck out for that old traitor Wei De. I've finally figured it out. I've got fish for brains; I'd be better off farming than climbing the Eastern Depot's ranks and making a fortune. I should give up on that dream."

He glanced in Shen Jue's direction. "Look over there. Now, *he's* worth talking about. Everyone thought he was done for, but it turns out he's thriving! He operates in the shadows while Wei De works out in the open. Who'll get the last laugh? I suppose that's still up in the air."

Xiahou Lian followed his gaze. "Who are those two men kneeling over there?" he asked.

"The rounder one is Su Yu, Assistant Director of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. The other one shaking is Li Changyan from the Northern Garrison and Surveillance Bureau," Zhu Shunzi explained.

Shen Jue stared coldly at the two men quivering on the ground and cracked a sinister smile. "Tell me, where are you meeting the prince of Fu?"

Gathering his courage, Su Yu retorted, "Shen Jue, you've got a lot of nerve, massacring an inn to intercept us halfway! You know that if the court indicts you, you won't escape, even if you sprout wings!" His tone softened. "It's not too late to turn back now. I'll advocate for you. And once he's taken your past loyalty into account, Wei-gonggong won't be too hard on you. We can cover this up and ensure that the Censorate and Ministry of

Justice hear nothing of it. You can simply continue on to Nanjing—what do you say?”

“Yes, yes!” Li Changyan chimed in desperately. “Turn back while you can, Shen-gonggong! It’s the wisest choice!”

“A very nice speech, but I’m afraid I’d be dead before I got there,” Shen Jue replied, dusting his robe off as he sat back in his chair. “You two should think about what to do next. You’re no strangers to the punishments in the imperial prison. Watching others be flayed and disemboweled must’ve been quite entertaining, But I wonder how experiencing it personally will feel?”

Both men shuddered violently, and Su Yu stammered, “Torturing imperial officials, Shen Jue…? Do you want to lose your head? Even if you discovered the prince’s whereabouts, what could you do? Would the prince listen to a disgrace like you? Or are you planning to kill him too? You—you’ve really got some nerve!”

“Still unwilling to talk? You’ve got quite the backbone,” Shen Jue sneered. “Before, I’d have put you through every torture I knew, but I’m too pressed for time to waste it on you. Men, prepare to ‘pluck the pipa’ with them. Make sure the ginseng soup is ready—I want them to savor every moment.” He tapped his knee thoughtfully, then turned to Su Yu with a smile. “You’re the brave one, so you can go first!”

As Shen Jue finished speaking, several of his officers stepped forward. They dragged Li Changyan to one side, forcing his head down to ensure that he could see every detail. Then they pressed Su Yu to the ground, binding his hands and feet tightly and stripping away his clothing to

reveal his chest and abdomen. Su Yu screamed in terror, hurling curses, but his protests were futile.

More agents entered carrying sharp blades, their expressions indifferent and methodical. They were seasoned torturers, well-versed in the darkest prison methods. “Plucking the pipa” was a poetic name, but the act itself was anything but delicate. The victim’s ribs served as the “pipa’s” strings, and a blade tip as the pick. The blade glided across the ribs, slicing through flesh and drawing blood with every stroke.

Shen Jue’s agents were old hands; they knew their craft so well they could “pluck” their victim’s ribs three or four times without killing them. If the prisoner fainted, they splashed him with water to rouse him, feeding him ginseng soup to keep him from dying. The victim would linger on death’s door, unable to live or perish. Sometimes, the torturers stripped their flesh away entirely, allowing the blade to pluck the exposed ribs—it really could produce some lovely music.

Su Yu passed out twice during the ordeal. Blood poured from his chest and stomach as one officer “played,” another forcing soup down his throat. Shen Jue watched impassively, toying with the tassel of a jade ornament at his waist, cold as an ice sculpture. Li Changyan trembled uncontrollably. Unable to bear the sight, he tried to look away, but the officers forced his face back. When Li Chengyan attempted to close his eyes, they pried them open again. There was no escape—he had no choice but to watch Su Yu’s torture.

“We’re just two nobodies,” Zhu Sunzhi whispered miserably to Xiahou Lian. “Shen Jue surely wouldn’t bother torturing us like that, right?”

Xiahou Lian, quite shaken himself, reassured Zhu Shunzi as best he could, but he wasn't entirely certain.

From their spot on the walkway, the pair had an unobstructed view of everything happening in the hall. It was Xiahou Lian's first time encountering such vicious methods. As an assassin, his kills had always been swift and decisive, preferably accomplished with a single, clean strike. This dragged-out torture with its elaborate theatrics was foreign to him. Even within the Garden, punishments rarely extended beyond severe lashings. Those were painful, but nothing compared to the horrors of plucking the pipa. For all his experience, Xiahou Lian couldn't help but furrow his brow and avert his gaze.

"He's dead," one agent finally reported to Shen Jue.

Su Yu lay lifeless on the ground, his white ribs exposed to the air, his lungs visible beneath. Li Changyan collapsed to the ground in a heap, his eyes vacant, and Shen Jue's cold gaze fell on him.

"Your turn," he said lightly.

"I'll talk! I'll confess to everything!" Li Changyan sobbed, scrambling to Shen Jue's side. "We've made arrangements! After the prince of Fu heads north from Jiading, we're to meet him in Hejian…in Hejian!"

"And then?"

"And then…then we'll head to the capital together. Wei-gonggong will meet His Highness on the outskirts and secretly escort him to the palace. They plan to force His Majesty to write an edict declaring the prince of Fu the crown prince!" Tears streamed down Li Changyan's face as he began to plead. "Shen Jue, I know you won't let me live, but at least give me a quick death—I beg you!"

“As you wish,” Shen Jue replied, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his temple. An officer approached and drew his blade, then grabbed Li Changyan by the hair and slashed his throat. Blood gushed forth, pooling on the ground.

Zhu Shunzi stared, his eyes wide with terror. “We’re next. We’re next! Shen Jue would never drag two burdens like us all the way to Hejian, and there’s no chance he’ll leave us alive and risk exposure. We’re as good as dead! We’re done for!”

Xiahou Lian’s heart skipped a beat. Without his saber, he truly was as defenseless as a fish on a chopping board. His eyes darted around, searching for any means of escape, but every door and passageway was heavily guarded. The upper floors might offer a slim chance, but fleeing would still be nearly impossible.

Dying here would be so pointless. Who would’ve guessed that, after surviving the Garden, Xiahou Lian would meet his fate at Shen Jue’s hands? Then again…maybe that wasn’t so bad after all. Glancing at the sky, Xiahou Lian managed a faint smile.

The interrogation complete, Shen Jue’s officers dragged the corpses of Su Yu and Li Changyan to the courtyard and tossed them into the burial pit. At some point, the rain had stopped, and the green moss covering the stone bricks glistened faintly with water. The wind died down to a whisper and gently stirred the hexagonal lanterns strung from the eaves, splashes of light and shadow flickering over the ground. Shen Jue sat in his chair a while longer before finally rising and heading upstairs. As he turned, his gaze happened to fall upon Xiahou Lian, who crouched on the steps beneath the covered walkway, watching him. The flickering lantern light played across his eyes, shifting between bright and dark.

He was a rough-looking man, gaunt and unassuming. When he wasn't smiling, a lonely, austere expression lingered on his brow. He kept his head lowered and spoke little, offering only occasional faint smiles that never reached his eyes.

He carries himself like a wandering ghost who no longer has a home, Shen Jue suddenly thought. *Like a version of Xiahou Lian who has withdrawn his fangs and sheathed his bloodlust.*

The man's eyes, especially, were the same shape as Xiahou Lian's. But where Xiahou Lian's eyes had burned with ferocity and bloodlust, the man's eyes looked empty. They were like hollow old wells, still and fathomless.

As Shen Jue turned and approached them, Zhu Shunzi instantly stiffened. He ducked behind Xiahou Lian, whispering, "He's coming! He's coming! The king of hell is here!"

Shen Jue stopped before Xiahou Lian, looking down. "After everything you just witnessed…aren't you afraid?"

Xiahou Lian shook his head.

"Your eyes—they remind me of someone," Shen Jue said.

Xiahou Lian put a hand to them. "Really? Who?"

"They're too similar—too much like Xiahou Lian's," Shen Jue said after a long, scrutinizing stare. "Gouge them out. Put them in a jar for me."

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving Xiahou Lian frozen in place. *What the hell was that?!*

Before he could react, agents moved to seize him. Xiahou Lian spun and bolted, only to find the end of the covered walkway blocked. As he

vaulted over the vermilion railing into the courtyard, a blade whistled past his head, the icy wind of its passage raising gooseflesh on his neck. More agents closed in, forcing him to fight. When one swung the flat of his blade at Xiahou Lian, the young man twisted sideways, locked his foe's wrist, and wrenched hard. The arm dislocated with a sickening crack.

Two more agents tackled Xiahou Lian's legs, while a third kicked him from behind. Xiahou Lian hit the ground hard, but he thrashed wildly, clawing forward inch by inch. The courtyard darkened with agents as they swarmed over him—knees pinning his limbs, hands crushing his spine into the dirt, someone grinding his face against the stones.

Through the haze of his pain, Xiahou Lian saw Shen Jue's retreating back growing smaller…and a glinting surgical knife drawing nearer.

Better dead than maimed, he thought, then roared, "Shen Jue! Don't go! I'll bring you to him!"

Shen Jue paused, half-turning. "A lie," he said coldly. "Pluck out his tongue and throw it away!"

"I'm Xiahou Lian!" Xiahou Lian snapped. "It's fucking *me*! Didn't you want to kill me? Then kill me, Shen Jue!"

Shen Jue ignored him and kept walking.

The knife lifted, its bright edge reflected in Xiahou Lian's eyes, cold as frost. Something within him stretched taut as the knife shining in his pupils got closer and closer.

Chapter 59:
Lonely Snow in the Mortal Realm

"HENGBO!" Xiahou Lian roared. "You found Hengbo in Taizhou! I left it there!"

Shen Jue finally stopped. He turned to look back at Xiahou Lian, his gaze icy.

At his side, Situ Jin spoke up. "The man is full of lies. Don't take him at his word."

The agents pressed Xiahou Lian's head down, flattening his cheek against the cold floor tiles. Gasping, he continued, "I really *was* the one who left Hengbo there! Shao—"

Before he could finish, Shen Jue had yanked him up and slammed him against the wall. Their faces were inches apart. Shen Jue's grip on Xiahou Lian's neck was freezing, as if frost were spreading from his fingers and threatening to turn Xiahou Lian to ice.

Shen Jue's voice was low and venomous, each word chilling. "Don't think that I know nothing about Qiye Garden. Xiahou Lian was poisoned with Seven Fifteen—how could he have survived? Listen well. From this point forward, if you speak a single lie, I'll ensure that you suffer like Su Yu, unable to beg for life or death. Who are you? How much do you know?"

How was he supposed to answer? Shen Jue was convinced that Xiahou Lian was dead. If he insisted that he was Xiahou Lian, he'd dig his

own grave. He met Shen Jue's gaze, cold as a lonely handful of lonely snow.

Stay calm. Think.

Steadying himself, Xiahou Lian quickly weighed his options. If someone impersonating Xiahou Lian warranted eye-gouging, then wouldn't the *real* Xiahou Lian be fully flayed and disemboweled? At this critical juncture, persisting with the deception was the only path he could take.

Xiahou Lian took a breath.

"I was Xiahou Lian's sworn brother," he said. "I accompanied him on most of his kills. Disguising myself, changing my voice—he taught me all of that. I know everything about the Garden. And about him."

"Proof," Shen Jue demanded.

Xiahou Lian hesitated, then quietly asked, "Is Jingtie still in your possession…?"

Shen Jue froze. For a long moment, he didn't move. Xiahou Lian stayed still too, leaning against the wall. Slowly, Shen Jue loosened his icy grip on Xiahou Lia's neck, then stood and turned away.

By the walkway, a leafy potted banana tree had been trembling in the rain; the downpour had dulled its emerald-green leaves. Shen Jue looked at them silently, then said, "Everyone go."

Soon, he and Xiahou Lian were alone in the small courtyard. The night wind was damp and cold from the rain. Shen Jue stood silent, his hands behind his back. Rainwater dripped from the eaves, the rhythm growing slower and slower. *Drip drop. Drip…drop.*

“You resemble him,” Shen Jue said suddenly. “Not just your eyes. Xiahou Lian was like a plague—anyone who got close to him was infected. Myself included, years ago.”

Xiahou Lian rubbed his throat but said nothing.

“How did he die?” Shen Jue asked after a pause.

Taking a moment to process the question, Xiahou Lian replied, “He dueled the Garden’s abbot to the death and bled out from his wounds.”

“Did you bury him?”

“…No.”

“Why not?! You were his sworn brother!” Shen Jue’s voice was furious.

Xiahou Lian’s hand, which had still been rubbing his throat, fell still. “In our line of work, death constantly hangs over us,” he said slowly. “Often, we die out in the wastes. Xiahou Lian never cared about it himself.” He frowned. “What would you do if he did have a grave—dig him up?”

Shen Jue didn’t answer, but after a long silence, he asked, “What did he say about me?” His voice was hoarse and barely audible.

Xiahou Lian didn’t understand why Shen Jue would want that question answered. After years spent hunting Xiahou Lian down, did he want to reminisce now that Xiahou Lian was “dead”? Despite his bemusement, he feigned recollection. “Not much. Just that you were old friends. You served the court, and he was an outlaw. It made sense for you to hunt him down—for praise or for the sake of rising through the ranks.” He smiled faintly, adding, “He understood.”

Shen Jue let out a hollow laugh—mocking, desolate. He'd never imagined, never dreamed that such a profound, absurd misunderstanding would separate him from Xiahou Lian. *That idiot.* To think he'd believed until the end that Shen Jue wanted him dead!

Nameless sorrow welled in Shen Jue. He clenched his jaw. "You're right. I *will* find his grave. Even if his body has been eaten to bones, I'll dig him out of the ground."

Looking down at his rough hands, Xiahou Lian smiled. "Kill me instead. I look like him. Consider it vengeance." He paused. "I stole this life anyway, so dying doesn't matter to me. But do me a favor—bury me with Hengbo. You have it, don't you? Xiahou Lian entrusted it to me before he died. I don't want it to be lost."

"He gave you Hengbo?" Shen Jue turned sharply.

Xiahou Lian nodded. "A year ago, I was fighting pirates in Taizhou, and someone knocked it from my hand. Later, I saw it at an auction, but your agents bought it first. It must be with you now, right?"

Shen Jue's chest tightened. Could this have been Xiahou Lian's most trusted companion? Could Xiahou Lian have trusted him enough to give him *Hengbo*? Fury and grief twisted inside Shen Jue, and he had the urge to kill the wretched man on the spot.

He glared. "You think *you* deserve Hengbo? I'll keep it. There's no need for you to worry about it. Now get out! I don't want to see you."

So it hadn't worked. Xiahou Lian sighed, gazing after Shen Jue's retreating figure as he walked away, his black robes and dark-gold embroidery nearly merging with the darkness. Xiahou Lian watched the

other man’s back until he’d crossed the walkway and was on the verge of vanishing past the turn. Suddenly, Xiahou Lian called out.

“Superintendent Xie!”

At the end of the walkway, Shen Jue stopped. Xiahou Lian stepped forward, facing him across the distance.

“Why do you despise Xiahou Lian so much?” Xiahou Lian asked. “Just because he was a jianghu outlaw so you were natural enemies? Or was it…something else?”

“Despise?” Shen Jue said. “I’ve never despised him.”

“Then why hunt him so relentlessly? Why were you so eager to kill him?”

The dim lantern light cast a pale glow on Shen Jue’s face, but it didn’t soften him. He looked beyond the walkway and away, the wind in his face carrying the slight scent of salt. “I just hated him. I hated that he lied, that he broke his promises. Every word he said, every vow he made, was fake.” He turned back, his voice biting. “Doesn’t a man like that deserve to die?”

He resumed walking away; as he disappeared around the corner, the hem of his robe flashed once, then vanished.

Shen Jue didn’t kill Xiahou Lian, nor Zhu Shunzi, but he kept them under constant watch. He confiscated their goose-quill sabers, reducing them to prisoners—even their trips to the latrine were monitored. Xiahou Lian didn’t dare provoke Shen Jue again. The man was more unpredictable and volatile than ever, and talking to him was like gambling with death.

Three days later, the group reached Hejian Prefecture, where the prince of Fu waited at a suburban estate. Shen Jue led his men in, leaving

Situ Jin with a group stationed on the rear hills as backup and insurance. Their vantage point was perfect; the estate below looked like a tiny game board placed in the grass, every figure crystal clear.

Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi were among the troops left behind on guard duty. Foxtail grass covered the hillside, the fuzzy fronds such a lush green that they seemed to drip the color as they swayed in the breeze. Crouched in the grass alongside the agents, Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi wore woven grass wreaths as camouflage, their unblinking eyes fixed intently on the estate below the mountain.

“So this is Shen Jue’s plan,” Zhu Shunzi whispered. “He wants to turn the prince of Fu against Wei De. If he succeeds, Wei De is finished. But will it work? Wei De holds all the power in the palace, while Shen Jue skulks in the mountains like a bandit. Any sane man would align himself with Wei De.”

“Not necessarily,” Xiahou Lian said.

“Why not? And how do you know?”

Xiahou Lian shook his head. He didn’t know. He just didn’t believe that a man like Shen Jue would fall easily.

In truth, Shen Jue was less confident than he appeared. This was only the second all-or-nothing gamble he’d made in his life. The first had been at Dong’an Gate, when he’d entered the palace alone. That day had been much like this one, he recalled; its flawless azure sky had stretched endlessly above, dotted with wispy clouds like scattered goose feathers, their edges dissolving into the blueness. But what did it matter now? The only person he’d ever really valued was gone. However meticulous his future schemes, he’d become no more than the graveyard’s most powerful

corpse. Still, having nothing left made him fearless. He adjusted his expression, curving his lips into his perfectly calibrated smile—as exquisite as the gold embroidery on his robes, as precisely crafted as lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

He walked down twisting walkways and through bamboo groves until the pavilion came into view. There, a rotund figure in crimson robes sat, his girth wrapped in layers of fabric that resembled a winding scarlet serpent. As the man turned his pale, moonlike face, Shen Jue ascended the steps and bowed deeply.

“Shen-gonggong! What an unexpected pleasure!” the prince of Fu’s jovial laugh rolled across the water. “Still the Forbidden City’s handsomest man, I see. No one can rival your elegance.”

The prince had grown even heavier in recent years. Since damaging his leg, he’d embraced life’s fleeting pleasures with increasing abandon, treating himself to all sorts of indulgences. His unchecked authority within this fiefdom had only exacerbated that tendency.

“Your Highness flatters me,” Shen Jue replied. “But a handsome face doesn’t fill one’s stomach. As for the reason for my visit, I’m sure Your Highness—”

“Ah-ah! No unpleasant business before you’ve had some tea!” The prince wagged his plump finger. “This rare blend came from a Western trader; it’s quite unlike our Great Qi varieties. You must try it.”

Shen Jue smiled faintly. Playing dumb and speaking in circles—this was the game officials loved to play as they jockeyed for political power. The goal was always to stall, to make the opponent impatient. Those who couldn’t hold their ground would inevitably retreat, conceding leverage.

The prince of Fu was the master here; Shen Jue and Wei De were both obliged to serve him. So naturally, he remained perfectly composed, waiting for Shen Jue to lose his cool and tip his hand.

Instead of responding to the prince's words, Shen Jue just lowered his head and reached into his wide sleeve, producing a bright yellow scroll. The prince's eyes locked on to it instantly. "Wh-what is that?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"A decree from His Majesty," Shen Jue replied crisply. Then he smiled and continued, "But shall we proceed with the tea first, Your Highness?"

Chapter 60:
Uncertain as the Drifting Wind

"WE'RE ALREADY HERE, Shen-gonggong, so spare me the jokes." The prince of Fu's eyes remained fixed on the imperial edict in Shen Jue's hands. "Quick—show it to me!"

Shen Jue didn't dare push his teasing too far; the prince of Fu was his superior, after all. He presented the edict to the prince with both hands then lowered his eyes to the cloud-patterned carvings on the square table of red-lacquered huanghuali wood, calmly waiting for the prince to finish reading.

Unrolling the edict hesitantly, the prince of Fu studied Shen Jue's expression, but it was inscrutable, revealing nothing. The eunuch was notorious for being a smiling Lord Yama;[28] he was friendly to your face even while he stabbed you in the back. The prince had long had his guard up, but he'd never expected that this disgraced eunuch, exiled to Nanjing to guard the imperial mausoleums, would be carrying an imperial decree—an edict intended to take effect posthumously!

His lowered his eyes and hastily scanned the document, skipping over the formalities—lines like *The emperor governs the realm by revering heaven and emulating our ancestors, nurturing the people*—and ignoring the emperor's self-aggrandizing drivel. Skimming ten lines at a time, he reached the final passage and saw these words: *Zhu Muchen, the prince of Fu and my eldest son, is of noble character. He resembles me in virtue and is assuredly capable of inheriting the great throne*. Gripping the edict tightly, the prince of Fu raised his trembling head in disbelief.

“Father named me his successor?!”

“It’s exactly as Your Highness sees. These are His Majesty’s own words, recorded by the Grand Secretariat’s scribe Gao Caimao and witnessed by Shen Jue himself.”

The prince of Fu clutched the edict, taking a long moment to compose himself. Doubt soon crept in, and he looked up at Shen Jue with a cold sneer, as if he’d suddenly realized something unsavory. “But Wei-gonggong claimed that my father intended to name my younger brother as heir and feared that I would harm him. That’s why I was never summoned to the capital! If Father truly meant to name me, why wasn’t I called back? Forging an edict isn’t impossible—surely this isn’t some trick of yours, Shen-gonggong?”

Though the prince of Fu was rather sloppy, he was no fool. Having spent most of his life in the palace, he’d read few books but absorbed plenty of deceit and intrigue. Manipulation and schemes were Shen Jue’s forte—and the prince of Fu’s as well. He wasn’t some pushover, and fooling him would require significant leverage.

Unfazed, Shen Jue lazily retrieved something made of white jade from an inner pocket. He slid it across the table toward the prince. “An edict can be forged, but can a tiger tally?”[29]

He’d been carrying a carved white tiger half the size of one’s palm. The tiger’s head was raised, its teeth bared. Polished smooth from years of handling, the carving gleamed with a yellowish hue that faded to white toward the tail, which was chipped at the tip. The prince recognized the object at once: As a child, he’d dropped his father’s tiger tally while playing and chipped it on the floor tiles.

The prince of Fu picked up the jade tally carefully, rubbing its broken tail. “Yes, a tiger tally can be forged too—but this broken tail couldn’t be. I was the one who damaged it, and Father scolded me relentlessly, so I’ve always remembered.” The situation was bizarre, but with the undeniably authentic tally in his hand, he had no choice but to believe Shen Jue. Suppressing his doubts, he set down the tally and clasped his hands in apology. “I never imagined that you were the one my father truly trusted, Shen-gonggong. My earlier rudeness was unwarranted. I hope you won’t take offense.”

Shen Jue gripped the prince’s hands, stopping his apology. “Your Highness flatters me. A lowly servant like me deserves no such courtesy—even if you scolded me or issued me commands on a whim, my duty would be to accept it.”

“You’re too modest,” the prince said. “Having received this edict, I still have one doubt.”

“Does your Highness wish to ask why His Majesty never summoned you to the capital?”

“Exactly.” The prince frowned. “Wei-gonggong told me that Father has grown exceptionally fond of my younger brother in recent years—personally teaching him calligraphy, taking him to the leopard enclosure, even bringing him to meetings with the grand secretaries with no hesitations. Wei-gonggong repeatedly sent me word that Father’s health was failing, urging me to prepare early, but never mentioning succession. This…”

“His Majesty’s affection for the second prince is just ordinary fatherly love. Think back—didn’t His Majesty also teach *you* calligraphy in

your youth? Didn’t he take you to gardens and scenic spots? Is fatherly love tantamount to appointing an heir to whom to entrust the land? Your Highness misunderstood His Majesty.” Shen Jue sighed. “His Majesty has long intended to name you as his heir. His delay in announcing it—well, that’s a question for Wei De!”

The prince flinched; Shen Jue’s tone was openly hostile toward Wei De, omitting even the expected honorifics. “Could it be…?” he wondered aloud.

“Think carefully, Your Highness—who relayed all the palace news to you?”

“But what about the empress dowager? She also said that Father held my brother in high regard.”

Shen Jue sighed again. “Your Highness may not know this, but His Majesty hasn’t visited the inner palace in a long time, and even the empress struggles to see him. The only one with regular access to the emperor is Wei De.”

Shen Jue rose, gazing at the lush trees in the garden, his hands clasped behind his back. “Wei De is His Majesty’s lifelong companion. He has served him for over sixty years. Since becoming the head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, he’s wielded unchecked power over the court. Forgive my bluntness, but without His Majesty’s protection, how could Wei De have grown so brazen? Consider the massacre of the Xie family and the torture of Vice Minister Gao in the imperial prison—not to mention Prefect Li of Shuntian, Chancellor Yang of the Imperial Academy… How many upright officials have fallen to his schemes?

“His Majesty’s backing let Wei De ignore the people’s grievances and turn a blind eye to rivers of blood. But once Your Highness ascends, righteous officials will surely rise against Wei De. Will Wei De remain secure as head of the Directorate when he *doesn’t* share sixty years of history with the emperor?”

“Of course not.” The prince shook his head. “No ruler would anger his ministers just to protect a eunuch.”

“Precisely. That’s exactly why he seeks to drag you down.” Shen Jue smiled faintly. “Should Your Highness storm the palace and seize the throne, your claim will be illegitimate. You will be branded disloyal and unfilial from the beginning, setting you at odds with upright officials. Some stubborn ministers might even sacrifice their lives to plead for your abdication, staining the court with blood and branding you a tyrant. To resist them, you’d have to rely on Wei De’s power, further entrenching his invincibility—that would be the first part.

“In addition to that, since you’d been kept in the dark about His Majesty’s true intentions, Your Highness would believe that your smooth ascension to the throne was thanks to Wei De. Your Highness has always been kindhearted by nature, and if you were grateful to Wei De, he’d inevitably manipulate you into securing his position.”

The word “kindhearted” pricked like a needle at the prince. He glanced at Shen Jue, but Shen Jue remained unmoved, his smile unwavering. Shen Jue’s rise to chief of the Eastern Depot had proved that he was no simpleton. The prince had dealt with him before and knew his duplicitous nature well. His words were generally credible, but not entirely, and his motive was clear: He wanted power. With Wei De gone, wouldn’t

Shen Jue take his place? Wei De schemed to collect favor—wasn't Shen Jue doing the same?

Despite all he knew, the prince played his part, slamming the table in feigned fury. "That Wei De! To devise such a vile plot, let alone scheme against *me*! Had I followed his advice to storm the palace, not only would I have alienated my father, but my reign would have been on thin ice from the start!" Clasping his hands, he added, "Thanks to your timely intervention, Shen-gonggong, that disaster has been averted. Rest assured that I'll show a villain like Wei De no mercy. Once I'm enthroned, the Directorate of Ceremonial will be yours!"

Shen Jue lowered his eyes with a faint smile. Empty promises were easy to make—one could even vow to hand over the throne itself. When it came to betrayal, however, the prince was a master. How could his assurances guarantee Shen Jue's future? The prince likely distrusted both Shen Jue and Wei De—and would likely discard both in time.

Seeing through the prince, Shen Jue shook his head. "Your Highness underestimates me. His Majesty has repeatedly tried to summon you, only to be thwarted by Wei De. On his deathbed, he has finally seen Wei De's true nature—still, it's too late. That's why he entrusted this task to me; he forced a rift between Wei De and myself before exiling me from the capital so that I could meet you. How could I exploit such a heavy responsibility for personal gain?"

The prince chuckled. "You may be a devout Buddhist known for your great compassion, but I'm not a child. I've heard plenty of lofty words about self-sacrifice, but I've yet to believe any of them—even those so-called upright officials scramble for promotions and fame. Now that you're

here, Shen-gonggong, we're in the same boat. Let's speak plainly. It'll set us both at ease."

Shen Jue nodded. Despite the prince's soft appearance, the man was quite sharp. "I'll hold nothing back, then. Twelve years ago, assassins from Qiye Garden massacred Jinling's Xie family. Xie Bingfeng was my father. 'Shen Jue' is a false name I adopted to enter the palace. My real name is Xie Jinglan."

The prince was clearly unprepared for the magnitude of that revelation. His eyes opened wide in shock. "What?! How can that be?"

"At the time, I was only twelve. I was studying late in the library when Garden assassins stormed the estate and slaughtered everyone on sight. I escaped through a dog's hole and barely survived. Later, I wandered the jianghu and followed refugees to the capital. There, starving and desperate, I entered the palace as a eunuch. That was fate: Had I not become a eunuch, how could I have learned that Wei De was my family's murderer?" Shen Jue's eyes brimmed with sorrow. He bowed deeply. "The one thing I seek is to kill Wei De and avenge my family. I beg Your Highness's permission!"

Verifying Shen Jue's story wouldn't be hard; a trip to Jinling would suffice. And however capable Shen Jue was, he was still a eunuch, so how could he possibly usurp the throne? Reassured, the prince helped Shen Jue stand up straight again, feigning sympathy. "So that's the truth. Who could've imagined that you had such a past? Your father was a great scholar; I once attended his lectures, and his erudition impressed me deeply. Then, suddenly, that tragic news arrived—that an entire family of over a hundred members had met an unjust end in Jinling. How heartbreaking! I've also heard about Dai-xiansheng's attempts to expose Wei De's crimes

—the grievances he listed and submitted! Alas, Wei De misled Father, who shielded him stubbornly. I could never condone that act, however! The heavens aren't blind—they left one Xie survivor for a reason. Rest assured, Shen-gonggong, I'll help you exact your vengeance!"

"Then my wish will be fulfilled. Once Your Highness succeeds, I'll leave court affairs behind and retire to Jinling." Shen Jue clasped his hands. "May Your Majesty rule the realm in peace and prosperity."

As they walked out together, Shen Jue glanced toward the mountain behind them, where Situ Jin had been watching through a gilded telescope. Catching Shen Jue's signal, Situ Jin immediately led his men down the slope. The prince's attendants were already at the gate, and they ushered the party inside to settle.

Shen Jue and the prince continued to converse under the eaves. Then, excusing himself to freshen up, the prince invited Shen Jue to dine with him later. The moment the prince walked away, however, Shen Jue's smile peeled away like flaking lacquer and vanished without a trace.

The prince allotted Shen Jue a private courtyard to rest in. There, bamboo cast blue shadows on the ground, the leaves rustling in the wind. Shen Jue passed through dappled light and cicada song to enter the house. In the main hall stood a rosewood side table and a round-backed chair flanked by a stone screen depicting a landscape and a celadon vase of orchids.

Shen Jue sat, massaging his temples. He couldn't relax as the servants and maids, all the prince's eyes and ears, roamed about; he couldn't afford a single misstep.

Still, the first hurdle had been cleared. The prince had accepted the forged edict and had sided with Shen Jue. Meanwhile, Wei De still waited eagerly in the capital, unaware that his men were already dead.

Deceiving both sides was a treacherous path. Shen Jue sighed, opening his eyes as Situ Jin entered the courtyard.

“The men are all in place,” Situ Jin reported.

Shen Jue grunted in acknowledgement, too weary to speak.

Situ Jin didn’t leave, however. “Why have you spared that man? He’s a liability.”

Shen Jue rubbed his forehead listlessly. “I can’t kill him—he was Xiahou Lian’s friend. Let him stay. When this is all over, whether I live or die, set him free.”

Chapter 61:
A Raging Storm

BELOW A PITCH-BLACK SKY of lashing wind and rain, the forest was a mass of shadows. Men and horses were reduced to dark silhouettes among a frenzied swaying of branches, gale-whipped leaves slapping their faces. Rain hats were useless now, and icy droplets stung Xiahou Lian's skin, making it nearly impossible to keep his eyes open as he blindly followed the horse ahead.

The prince of Fu's carriage had sunk into a mud pit, forcing everyone to dismount and push it free. Bracing himself against the rear wheel, Xiahou Lian strained alongside the others as they shouted in unison through the downpour. The prince peeked his plump, pale face out from behind the carriage curtain, only for the rain to drive him back in immediately. The carriage's heavy frame barely budged at first, but Xiahou Lian gritted his teeth and shoved with all his might. With a final heave, the carriage lurched forward, splattering mud across his face as the vehicle finally came free.

There was no time to wipe himself clean. Xiahou Lian scrambled back onto his horse just as Situ Jin passed by and tossed him a handkerchief. The road was nearly impassable, but luckily, they soon reached a village. The prince of Fu ordered the forty-strong party to halt there, and Shen Jue raised no objections. They crowded into the settlement, where the wealthiest local landlord offered them shelter. Even his three-courtyard estate couldn't accommodate them all. Only Shen Jue and the prince received private rooms, so Xiahou Lian and the Eastern Depot agents bedded down in the ancestral hall.

The rain grew heavier. In the darkness, the mountains loomed like slumbering beasts. The roof tiles rattled violently, as if shattering under the storm’s assault, and the entire hall seemed to tremble. Xiahou Lian couldn’t sleep. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the others were tossing and turning restlessly as well. Unease gnawed at him. He rose and pushed open the door—the water outside had already risen ankle-deep. To wash his feet, he could simply have sat on the threshold.

“Shouldn’t someone inform the supervisor that this might turn into a flood?” asked Xiahou Lian.

“That’s doubtful,” someone replied. “Landlord Chen said that the village weathers storms like this every year, and they’ve never had an outright flood yet. Maybe it’ll calm down soon. Let’s wait.”

“What’s the terrain like here?” Xiahou Lian pressed. “If a flood strikes, it could drown the whole village in an hour. We need to know where to run if that happens.”

“No idea,” another agent answered. “It’s too dark to see.”

The night was pitch black, as if the world were shrouded in a veil. Only the swaying shadows of trees were visible; the roaring rain swallowed everything else. Xiahou Lian hesitated for a moment, then decided to dress and find Shen Jue.

As he stepped outside the hall, he nearly collided with Situ Jin. Nodding curtly at Xiahou Lian’s muttered apology, Situ Jin entered the hall and barked orders at a group of his subordinates.

“Our supervisor says the rain is too heavy, and this is a low-lying area at risk of flooding. He’s ordered us to lead the horses east to higher ground and set up camp. Keep them safe.” Once the agents he’d addressed had

acknowledged his instructions, Situ Jin continued. “The rest of you, follow me. We’ll escort His Highness up the mountain.”

“Isn’t the mountain path too narrow for his carriage?” Xiahou Lian asked, trailing behind.

Situ Jin frowned. “Well, a horse can’t carry him either. We’ll have to carry him ourselves.”

Eight men hoisted a bamboo sedan chair bearing the prince of Fu as he clutched an umbrella. From a distance, they appeared to be carrying a small mountain. Shen Jue walked alongside them, draped in a rain cape, his expression grim. Cold droplets seeped through the cape’s seams and chilled him to the bone. Irritation simmered in his chest. How he wished he could strip away the prince’s excess flesh before hauling the man up the trail!

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Shen Jue’s face paled. Doors were flung open across the village as panicked residents began to flee—some half-dressed, some barefoot, and all of them scrambling for higher ground. A gong clanged frantically, accompanied by hoarse shouts of “A flood’s coming! Run!”

The agents pressed forward, but their substantial burden slowed their progress. The narrow path was now jammed with people.

In the distance, a white line appeared—a towering wall of water roaring toward them, swallowing everything in its path. Thatched roofs and earthen walls collapsed instantly; even Landlord Chen’s grand estate succumbed. The rushing water toppled trees and swept away flailing livestock that crashed into the crowds. Shen Jue’s agents were scattered, and even the prince of Fu vanished.

Shen Jue, too, was engulfed. Water gushed into his mouth, choking him. The current was a black abyss full of debris and shadowy figures. He flailed, grasping at nothing, and helplessly began to sink.

Suddenly, a hand seized him by the collar and yanked him upward. He broke through the water's surface, coughing violently and gasping for air.

"Shen Jue! Are you all right?"

Blinking water from his eyes, he saw who'd addressed him. *This infuriating idiot!* Wiping his face, Shen Jue immediately tried to dive back under. Xiahou Lian hauled him back by the collar. Enraged, Shen Jue jerked his head back. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"I could ask you the same!" Xiahou Lian yelled back. "We have to go east, so why the fuck are you swimming west?!"

"The prince of Fu is still in the water!"

Xiahou Lian nearly lost it. "That soft bastard's a lost cause! Did you soak yourself stupid?!"

"I have to save him!" Shen Jue roared, gritting his teeth.

He'd barely made it a few strokes before another wave knocked him off balance. This time, though, an arm locked around his waist, and a hand cradled his head, pressing him against a solid chest. Sound was muffled underwater, but he could've sworn he felt a strong, steady heartbeat against his ear.

As something struck Xiahou Lian's back, he gave a muffled grunt. Then they stopped drifting, and he pushed Shen Jue upward.

Wiping his face, Shen Jue squinted through the water and saw that Xiahou Lian's clothes had snagged on a protruding branch just in time to save them from being carried away.

The ancient tree Xiahou Lian had gotten caught on was leafless, but it was sturdy enough to withstand the flood. Xiahou Lian helped Shen Jue climb it first, then followed him. The tree's bark, slick with rain, gleamed in the dim light.

Perching on a branch, Xiahou Lian wrung out his soaked clothes. Below, the torrent now carried wreckage—splintering planks, extinguished lanterns, baskets, even corpses. The world was nothing but a watery grave; the relentless wind only battered a few tiled rooftops protruding from the floodwaters, resembling lonely boats.

Shen Jue crouched beside Xiahou Lian, his expression stormy. At least he seemed to have abandoned his suicidal plan to dive back in for the prince.

"There's the prince of Fu!" Xiahou Lian said suddenly.

Shen Jue followed his gaze downward, below the trees. A portly corpse was floating past. It had bloated to nearly twice its original size, its features swollen beyond recognition.

The prince of Fu was dead. The lynchpin of Shen Jue's plan was lost.

The scheme relied on his luring the prince to the capital with the forged edict. Entering without an imperial summons, the prince would be detained, and the fake decree would implicate both him and Wei De in treason. The old emperor had entrusted Shen Jue with the tiger tally to secure the second prince's succession, but could he truly abandon his eldest son? Either way, with the prince of Fu now dead, Wei De remained

untouchable. The weak-willed emperor, dependent on his lifelong attendant, would never move against him without irrefutable proof of rebellion.

All Shen Jue's plotting had come to naught. His face darkened. Despite the summer heat, the air around him was frigid.

"Superintendent." Xiahou Lian was wringing out his clothes. "If you want to flee, I can help. I've got experience. I can get you out of Great Qi. We could head south to Nanyang or east to Dongying—your choice."

Shen Jue eyed him suspiciously. "Why would you help me? After how I've treated you, you should seize this opportunity and kill me. That'd ensure your freedom."

"I killed too many people in my youth. I'm afraid of going to hell, so I'm trying to do some good now. Saving someone is saving someone, and I wound up being able to save you." Xiahou Lian shrugged. "Count yourself lucky."

"There is no hell."

"If you believe in it, it exists." Xiahou Lian wrung his pant legs dry. "And if there's no hell, that means there's no underworld, which means that, once we're separated from our loved ones, it's forever. So it's better if there is a hell." He smiled faintly. "Right?"

Shen Jue studied him silently. "Your name is Shang-erlang, correct?"

Xiahou Lian nodded.

"Shang-erlang," Shen Jue said, leaning against the trunk, "these past years, when Xiahou Lian was alive…how was he?"

Xiahou Lian gazed at the dark water. "In pretty bad shape. His father killed his mother, so he killed his father, then he lost his brother and his

master. All real tragedies.”

Shen Jue’s fists clenched. It was just as his intelligence had reported: Xiahou Lian had suffered endlessly, and Shen Jue had been powerless to help.

“Did he resent me?” Shen Jue asked. “For becoming chief of the Eastern Depot and failing to save him?”

Xiahou Lian looked at him in surprise. “Why would he? That wasn’t your fault. If anything, he owed you an apology. He lied, he broke promises—everything you said about him was right.”

He paused, then added quietly, “I’m sorry.”

Shen Jue’s heart skipped a beat. That apology sounded exactly like Xiahou Lian—the tone, the cadence. He and his friend were so alike that it hurt. He dug his fingers into the tree bark, not noticing when the action drew blood. His chest ached, and he felt suffocated. He stood abruptly, as if physical distance could dull the pain.

Looking down, he saw the wound on Xiahou Lian’s back. The gash was still bleeding, yet the man had been joking and laughing as if unharmed.

“You’re injured,” Shen Jue said sharply.

“Barely. It doesn’t matter.”

“Take off your clothes. Wet fabric will aggravate it.”

Xiahou Lian refused. Although Shen Jue was insistent, he wouldn’t budge. Eventually, Shen Jue gave up; it wasn’t like he could just rip the clothes off the other man. If the fool wanted to risk infection, so be it.

Hours later, the water receded. Figures rowed toward them on makeshift rafts, and distant shouts carried on the wind—“Superintendent! Where are you?”

Xiahou Lian waved and yelled back. When the “rafts” neared, he saw that they were just planks, the oars long pieces of scavenged wooden debris. Still, they’d at last been rescued.

Situ Jin paid for shelter in a hunters’ hut on the mountainside. The village below had transformed into a vast lake, its surface incongruently luminous under the dull gray sky. Only a few feeble lanterns flickered on the slopes. The surviving villagers sobbed and wailed—many had lost family members overnight.

As soon as he and Xiahou Lian reached solid ground, Shen Jue’s mask slipped back into place. He ordered Xiahou Lian to disguise one of his agents as the prince of Fu.

“Impersonating royalty is treason!” Xiahou Lian argued. “And how long can a disguise last? Your agent’s too skinny, anyway—the prince was fat. One slip at night, and the padding will show. Consider this carefully—it isn’t a game!”

Shen Jue sipped his tea, unfazed. “I’m well aware, but there’s no need for you to worry. Put that energy into his disguise.”

“No.”

Shen Jue smirked. “What? Now that we’ve survived the flood, you’re no longer afraid of torture?”

Xiahou Lian was angry enough to laugh. “I saved your *life*, Lord Superintendent.”

“Oh?” Shen Jue glanced at him. “I’ve had quite a shock. I can’t even recall what happened yesterday.”

Xiahou Lian just stared at him.

In the end, Shen Jue had to threaten to kill Zhu Shunzi to force Xiahou Lian to cooperate.

What’s his plan now? Xiahou Lian fumed. *Pass some agent off as the prince and march into the capital? Shen Jue, you asshole! You really have a death wish!*

But Shen Jue had always been this way—when it came to pushing himself, to achieving his goals, nothing could stand in his way. Xiahou Lian remembered the freezing boy who studied through frigid nights, who trained relentlessly at the palace. Time changed people, but some traits were bone-deep, impossible to alter.

His frail health hadn’t changed either. Despite downing gallons of hot tea, Shen Jue fell ill, burning with fever. Situ Jin and Shen Jue’s other agents foraged for herbs to brew into bitter medicines. Peering through the window, Xiahou Lian saw Shen Jue curled beneath a pile of blankets so thick it resembled a burial mound.

Underneath slept Shen Jue, his face flushed with fever. Even swaddled in blankets during the height of summer, he was still freezing. The hunters’ hut reeked of hay, and the tiny room overflowed with clutter. There were storage chests pressed against the wall, and a worm-eaten wooden table stood near his feet. Lying there, Shen Jue felt like another discarded object. The bedding had been used, and it carried an indescribable stench. He was miserable.

Night dragged on. Pale light filtered through the paper window; beyond it were the dark shadows of trees. From time to time, the villagers' sobs drifted in, echoing like the wails of spirits.

Shen Jue was thirsty, but he had no servants here—Situ Jin and the others were his subordinates, not his attendants, and they weren't there around the clock to serve him. They'd administered his medicine and left, awaiting dawn and new orders from a freshly awakened Shen Jue.

Thus, Shen Jue's only choice was to endure. Time crawled by, bit by bit, the night seeming to drag, extending boundlessly onward. Then, he felt someone lift him and hold water to his lips—cold, sweet well water. A fresh, damp cloth replaced the dried one on his forehead, soothing his fever, and his blazing cheeks cooled.

Blinking groggily, Shen Jue glimpsed a figure sitting against the bed frame at the head of the bed.

A-Lian? he thought. His brain felt like mud—he'd seemingly slipped into the past, back to his days at the Xie residence. He was Xie Jinglan, and Xiahou Lian was his book-boy, dozing at the foot of his bed and fetching water when asked.

Two days later, the flood retreated, revealing the ravaged village. A few houses remained, but most had collapsed. Dead pigs choked the roads, their dark carcasses stiff and cold. Fallen trees lay strewn across the ground, their withered branches concealing pale, drowned corpses beneath.

Shen Jue ordered his forces to depart. Although his fever had eased, it hadn't broken; his skin was still slightly warm to the touch. Still, they had no time to wait—he had to reach the capital before the emperor died. He

commanded the agents to feed and ready the horses and to pack the tents and supplies. They were to leave within two hours.

Xiahou Lian frowned. “You plan to ride in the wind? You’re still sick. Do you want to die on the road?”

Shen Jue ignored that question. “Was it you last night?”

Xiahou Lian paused. “Yes, but don’t thank me. I just fetched you water since nobody else did.”

Shen Jue’s grip on the water jug tightened. “Come near me again, and I’ll kill you. Stay out of my affairs.”

Xiahou Lian gaped at him—there was definitely something wrong in that brat’s head. Ignoring Shen Jue, he confirmed their departure time with Situ Jin, then walked away, dragging Zhu Shunzi after him.

Situ Jin watched him go. “You don’t want to have them tailed?”

Shen Jue closed his eyes. “No need. We’ll be galloping back to the capital at top speed, so it would be impossible for him to outpace us. He’s harmless. Leave him be.”

Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi returned hauling an assortment of salvaged debris, including the chassis of the prince of Fu’s carriage. Its ornate panels and canopy had long since been washed away in the floodwaters, but the wooden undercarriage and its four wheels were still intact. The Eastern Depot agents watched curiously as Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi began whittling wooden shafts to reconnect the carriage tongue to the frame. Catching on, a few agents joined them to assist.

Next, Xiahou Lian scavenged four bamboo poles and a large oilcloth tarp, fashioning a crude flat-roofed canopy over the chassis. As agents wiped down the still-waterlogged wood, Xiahou Lian purchased two quilts

from hunters' families to line the interior. Once he'd hitched a pair of horses to its makeshift yoke, their primitive-yet-functional carriage was complete.

Shen Jue didn't so much as glance at it. When the appointed hour of departure arrived, he stubbornly attempted to mount his horse. Still weakened by illness, his limbs kept on buckling. Only after a laborious struggle did he climb into the saddle. Xiahou Lian ordered him down, telling him to get into the carriage.

Shen Jue turned to look at the ramshackle "carriage" with its oilcloth canopy and gaudy bridal quilts, their surfaces embroidered with bright red peonies. The vulgarity was enough to make anyone cringe. His expression full of undisguised disdain, he insisted, "We depart immediately. All mount!"

The agents glanced uncertainly at Xiahou Lian but ultimately obeyed Shen Jue, climbing onto their horses. Xiahou Lian took several deep breaths, refusing to argue with a fever-addled idiot. Once he calmed a bit, he strode forward, lifted Shen Jue from his saddle, and swept him into a bridal carry before the agents' astonished eyes.

One broad-shouldered, long-limbed man was cradling another, himself tall and full-grown—yet there was an unsettling harmoniousness to the sight.

"Unhand me!" Shen Jue spat through clenched teeth.

"Sure—if you want me to drop you on your ass," Xiahou Lian retorted, looking down at him.

Shen Jue was so furious he laughed. "I see that *you* have a death wish."

Xiahou Lian barked his own a humorless laugh. “I stopped caring about my survival years ago. Flay me and disembowel me if you like. As if I’d be afraid—I’ve gone through the fires of hell already. If worse comes to worst, I’ll just bite off my own tongue before your torturers can get started. So what’s it going to be? Will you take the carriage?”

“I refuse!” Shen Jue roared, then called out to his men. “Are you all statues?! Seize this madman!”

Just who the fuck is the madman here?! Shen Jue's obstinance was enough to make Xiahou Lian's temples throb. He almost wanted to slam the guy's head right into the dirt. "Think beyond yourself for once, Shen Jue!" he snapped. "Think about your brothers! If you collapse and die here, that's your choice, but what about these men who followed you through deadly battles? What becomes of them?"

As he lectured Shen Jue, the agents dismounted in unison, dropping to their knees to the ground. "We beg you, Superintendent—please take care of yourself!" they chorused.

When even Situ Jin disregarded his command, Shen Jue finally went silent. He turned his face away in defeat, leaving Xiahou Lian to look at his cold, pale profile. Xiahou Lian settled him among the blankets in the carriage. Nestled in the red fabric, Shen Jue's pale face looked like porcelain, robbed of moonlight.

The storm had passed, leaving a sky the pristine blue of Hangzhou silk embroidered with subtle wisps of cloud. Morning light glinted off the water droplets beading the oilcloth canopy, making them sparkle like jewels. The carriage jolted forward; lulled by the motion, Shen Jue's eyes grew heavy. Xiahou Lian sat and guided the carriage's horses, his shadow falling over Shen Jue's face.

That man had the same eyes as Xiahou Lian, Shen Jue mused, and a personality just as rough and unyielding.

Ten years had passed. Xiahou Lian was no longer the fourteen-year-old of Shen Jue's memory. The last time he'd seen Xiahou Lian was in Liuzhou three years prior; he'd become a peerless assassin—a weapon that

could cut down gods and Buddhas alike without hesitation. An unstoppable force.

Yet the man before him made it seem as though the Xiahou Lian of a decade past had weathered the storms, crossed the river of time itself, and returned to Shen Jue's side.

Was that true or an illusion? Shen Jue could no longer tell. It occurred to him that Qian Zhengde had been right. Even the moon reflected in water became real if one refused to stir the water's surface. Beneath the blankets, Shen Jue's lips curled into a smile both mocking and desolate. *Sleep*, he told himself. *Just sleep. In dreams, everything is real.*

Courtesy Addresses

GlossaRy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yang Su

A balding girl from the post-90s generation.

Good at sleeping, zoning out, and eating.

Someone with no grand aspirations in life; writing is her only consistent endeavor.

“Life is a journey, and I’m willing to use my pen as my horse and gallop forward.”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
There's Something Wrong with the Chief
VOLUME 3

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

HISTORICAL NOTE

There's Something Wrong with the Chief takes place during the fictional Qi dynasty, which is heavily inspired by the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

SHEN JUE 沈玦: The pseudonym adopted by Xie Jinglan to serve in the palace as a eunuch. Xie Jinglan was the third young master of the Xie family; he is the family's only survivor. A "jue" is a rounded jade pendant.

XIAHOU LIAN 夏侯潋: A young assassin from Qiye Garden. His name means "rippling." Played Xie Jinglan's servant before the Xie family was massacred.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

QIYE GARDEN

XIAHOU PEI 夏侯霈: The Garden's strongest assassin. The Garuda of the Eight Legions. Xiahou Lian's mother. Armed with Hengbo (横波, "Great Waves").

QIU YE 秋叶: A Garden assassin. The Garden's master of disguise. The Kinnara of the Eight Legions. Becomes Xiahou Lian's master. Armed with Qiushui (秋水, "Autumn Water").

DUAN JIU 段九: An assassin close to Xiahou Lian (who calls him "Uncle Duan").

SHIXIN BUDDHA 弒心佛陀: The old abbot in charge of the Garden. Xiahou Lian's father.

CHIYAN 持厌: Xiahou Lian's older twin brother. A reclusive assassin who stays on Heimianfo year-round.

SHU QING 书情: Xiahou Lian's shidi. Qiu Ye's disciple.

EUNUCHS AND THE EASTERN DEPOT

WEI DE 魏德: The leader of the Directorate of Ceremonial. Extremely powerful at court. Ordered the massacre of the Xie family. Godfather to multiple eunuchs, including Shen Jue.

SHEN WENXING 沈问行: Shen Jue's young godson.

ZHU SHUNZI 朱顺子: An Eastern Depot agent.

UNDERWORLD ASSOCIATES

TANG SHIQI 唐十七: Originally from the Tang Clan, a sect specializing in mechanical devices and puppets.

LIUSHAO-ER 柳梢儿: A young, newly debuted courtesan.

OTHERS

SITU JIN 司徒谨: A member of the army. Practices the Blizzard Saber style.

ZHU MINGYUE 朱明月: Situ Jin's beloved. Her father owned a medical clinic.

NOBLE CONSORT LI 李贵妃: The mother of the second prince.

LIU GUICANG 柳归藏: The master of Jingdao Villa. Specializes in powerful katana saber techniques. Has many disciples.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names or one syllable of a disyllabic name.

-ER: "Child." Affectionate suffix.

LAO-: "Old." Friendly prefix.

DA-: "Big" or "elder." Prefix for an elder.

-GE/-GEGE: "Older brother." Affectionate suffix for any older boy or man. "Dage" is a more respectful, although still casual, variant.

-JIE/-JIEJIE: "Older sister." Affectionate suffix for any older girl or woman.

-DI/-DIDI: "Younger brother." Affectionate suffix for a younger boy or man.

-LANG: Affectionate suffix for a young gentleman.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger” that can be added before names or titles for juniors. Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGGONG: Polite address for a eunuch serving in the palace.

SHAOYE: “Young master.” Polite address for young men.

ERLANG: Form of address for the second son of a family. (“Er” means “second.”)

XIANSHENG: Polite address for men. Originally only for those who possessed great learning or who had contributed significantly to society.

QIANBEI: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled.

SHIFU: The teacher or master of one’s own martial sect.

SHINIANG: The wife of one’s shifu.

SHIDI: A junior male member of one’s own sect.

SHIGE: An older male member of one’s own sect.

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In Imperial China, wealthy men commonly took concubines in addition to a wife. The concubines were expected to live with the man and bear him children. In general, more concubines correlated to higher social status. Thus, a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have dozens or even a hundred.

EUNUCHS, THE EASTERN DEPOT, AND THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD: Relationships between emperors and their literati officials were often tense. Many emperors raised trusted eunuchs over the imperial ministers, giving the eunuch faction enormous power.

The Eastern Depot, led by eunuchs, was established under those circumstances. It spied on officials, rooting out dissenters. Later, it gained the authority to punish such dissenters through the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the dynasty's secret police. The literati decried the Eastern Depot for their perceived gross abuses of power. The organization remains infamous.

THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: A series of exams designed to select the brightest from the populace, positioning them to serve in the court as officials. The exams comprised three stages: entry, provincial, and finally palace exams. They focused heavily on Confucian doctrine and literature, and passing was a great honor. Each exam's top scorer, or "principal graduate," returned home showered in accolades.

Post-Tang Chinese society forbade an official to pass his position directly to his son. Therefore, the only way for families to remain part of

the aristocracy was through the imperial examinations. The exams themselves were open to all, making them the sole means by which those from humble backgrounds could climb the social ladder.

THE JIANGHU: An underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves using their own moral codes.

MEMORIALS: Documents written by officials to the emperor. A memorial followed a strict format determined by the problem it was written to address.

THE NINE-RANK SYSTEM: During certain dynasties, officials were divided into ranks denoting their status within the court. First-rank officials were highest; ninth-rank officials were lowest.

PROSTITUTES AND COURTESANS: In Imperial China, many of these women doubled as entertainers and were able to sing and dance. Those who won the favor of a rich and powerful man could leave their brothel through marriage. Particularly famous were the Yangzhou Companions, women from Yangzhou who underwent rigorous training in song, dance, instruments, poetry, and literature from a young age.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yang Su

A balding girl from the post-90s generation. Good at sleeping, zoning out, and eating. Someone with no grand aspirations in life; writing is her only consistent endeavor. “Life is a journey, and I’m willing to use my pen as my horse and gallop forward.”

Footnotes

Chapter 35: A Blithe Departure

[1] “Nameless Ghost.”

[2] A style of Chinese saber resembling and based on the Japanese katana.

[3] A Yuan dynasty romance by Wang Shifu depicting a young couple’s secret love affair.

[4] “Bald donkey” is rude slang for a Buddhist monk.

Chapter 38: Returning Once More

[5] One of China’s legendary Four Beauties.

[6] Shen Wenxing’s name (沈问行) contains the character for “mouth” (口).

Chapter 39: Planning Far Ahead

[7] One of the “ten ancient melodies”; composed during China’s Spring and Autumn period. During the Warring States period, “The Spring Snow” became a symbol of sublime themes only a rare few could appreciate.

Chapter 40: The Black-Faced Buddha

[8] A basic text for Confucian students compiled in the Qing dynasty.

[9] A Ming dynasty novel by Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng.

Chapter 41: Kill Without Mercy

[10] Human feces collected from homes at night.

[11] A Qing dynasty collection of paintings depicting everyday domesticity between a husband and wife.

Chapter 42: The Night's Chill

[12] A wide, billowy sleeve style.

[13] The oldest surviving collection of Chinese poetry.

[14] A bawdy traditional folk song.

[15] A river said to flow in the underworld.

Chapter 43: Willow Tips

[16] A puzzle made of interlocking wooden pieces.

Chapter 44: No Way Back

[17] “Gui” (归), the first character in Guicang, sounds identical to “gui” (龟), which means “turtle” and is slang for “cuckold.”

Chapter 45: The Night’s Return

[18] A paper note representing silver.

[19] Tang Shiqi had five uncles older than this one.

Chapter 50: A Boundless Heart

[20] Dingsi, Dingwei and Jiachen day are part of a counting system known as the sexagenary cycle or ganzhi, which numbers years in groups of sixty.

Chapter 52: A Hasty Grudge

[21] Qiu Ye’s name (秋叶) means “autumn leaves.”

Chapter 53: The Pull of a Thousand Mechanisms

[22] “Qianji” (牵机) means “a thousand mechanisms.”

[23] A bridge said to stretch over the River of Helplessness in the underworld. Crossing it allowed one to reincarnate.

[24] A soup said to erase a dead person’s memories of their most recent life prior to reincarnation.

Chapter 55: Rain and Night in the Jianghu

[25] An ornate gate in a building with multiple courtyards, generally marking the boundary between public areas and private residential spaces.

Chapter 57: The Frightening Waves Rise Again

[26] A plaque at which one can offer incense and worship in hopes that the individual represented by the plaque will live a long life. These plaques often honor individuals who did the purchaser a great favor.

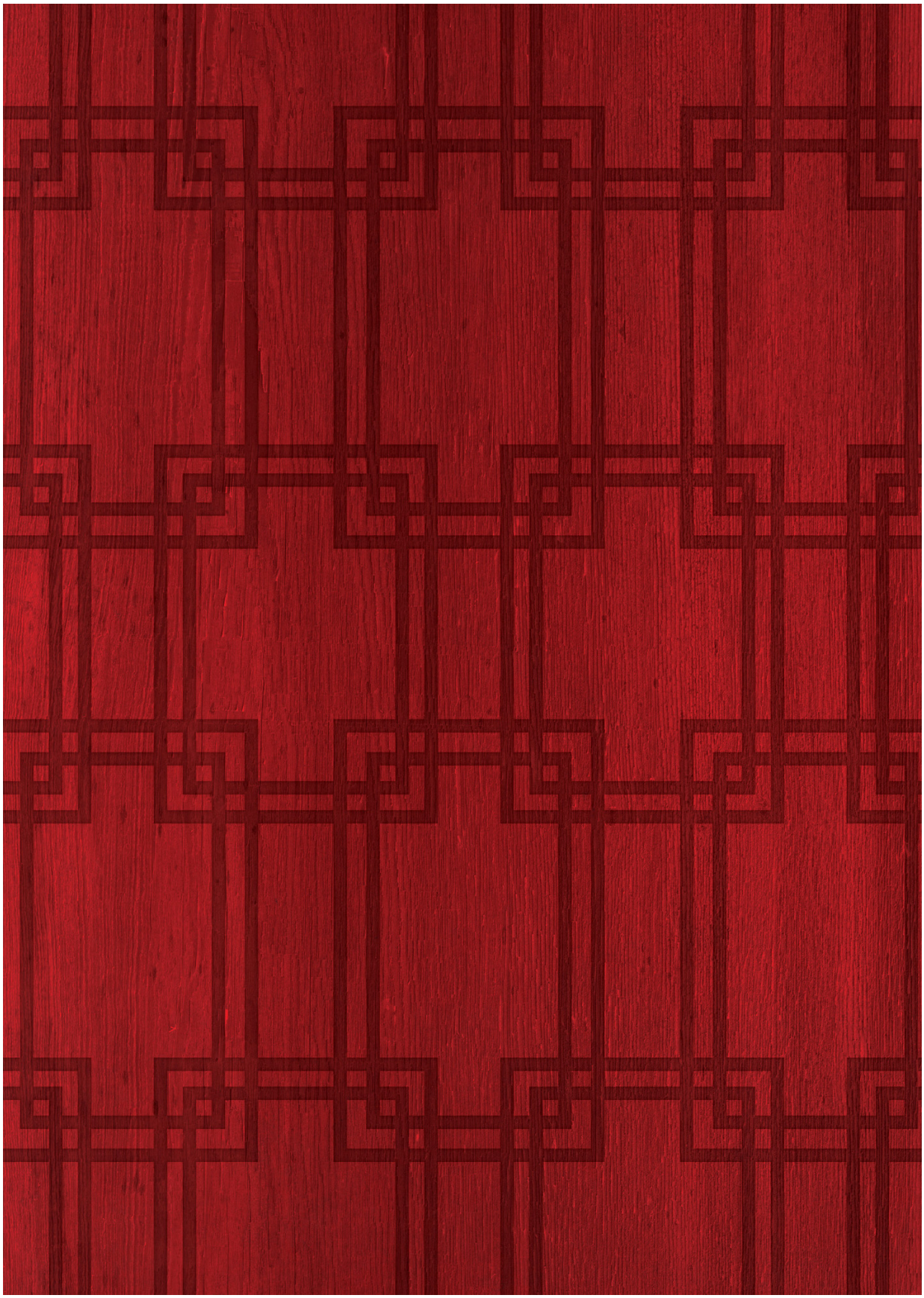
Chapter 58: Reaper on a Rainy Night

[27] An important Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism. Intoning his name is a common practice among Chinese Buddhists.

Chapter 60: Uncertain as the Drifting Wind

[28] Buddhist and Hindu god of death and justice.

[29] Used as proof of authorization.



A TRAGIC PAST AND A DEADLY WORLD OF ASSASSINS SPARK A LOVE THAT DEFIES FATE IN THIS FAN-FAVORITE DANMEI.

Twin Paths of Power and Peril

Reeling from the devastating loss of someone close to him, young assassin Xiahou Lian sets off on a perilous journey to find his long-lost brother, who's hidden away on a remote and forbidding mountain. But what Xiahou Lian encounters at the summit isn't the reunion he imagined. Instead, he's thrust into a web of secrets and betrayals more harrowing than anything he's faced in Qiye Garden.

Within the palace walls, Shen Jue moves like a shadow. Though he wears a mask of obedience while serving as his ruthless godfather's loyal pawn, Shen Jue is executing a dangerous long game. Discovery could shatter his schemes, however...

When Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue cross paths once more, it's no longer as allies. Each is navigating deadly enemies—and Xiahou Lian believes those foes might even include Shen Jue.

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